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# *The Lively and the Just*

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PAUL RAMSEY

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA STUDIES

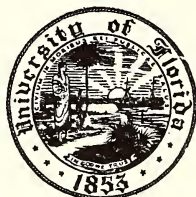


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An Argument for Propriety

PAUL RAMSEY

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA PRESS



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*This book is for*  
*SAMUEL HOLT MONK*  
*a proper teacher and friend*

*English*

*Banta*

*4-2-63*



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## *A Prefatory Note*

I WOULD LIKE TO THANK THE University of Alabama Research Committee and the administration and trustees of Elmira College for research grants; the librarians and library staffs of the University of Alabama, Princeton University, Elmira College, and Cornell University for many courtesies; my student assistant, Miss Janice Ultsch, who typed the manuscript, for high competence and extraordinary good nature.

As for the friends, family, teachers who have directly or indirectly helped much, they know who they are; they know that I am grateful; they will not mind, I trust, being left anonymous. From that anonymity I except one man: to him I dedicate this book.



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# 1

## *Several Concepts*

**C**RITICISM is a practical act, an enabling act of love. It should enable readers to understand and judge poems better; it should enable—in the short and long run—poets to write better poems. Good criticism has, in fact, done both. It should also “apologize”; it should convince men that poetry is worth the serious thought and feeling poets and critics and readers have offered to it. Criticism has often done this nobly and well. One may think of Sidney, Johnson, Shelley, Arnold, Eliot.

Criticism is also theory and history. It analyzes; it traces; it relates; it attempts, however confusedly, to order and defend its own assumptions. There is power here as well as danger, the power of the mind, of the rational and persuasive apprehension of truth. To know truth is the good of the mind.

The chief dangers of criticism are sterility and barbarous exfoliation. These dangers arise, first, from the pride or ignorance that leads the critic to ignore the fact that his is a “medial discourse”<sup>1</sup> and to forget his humility, his manners, and his genre. Criticism is the servant of poetry,

not its master, and it should heed what old-fashioned nursemaids taught: respect for one's betters. Yet, if it is a servant it is also a judge, and to abdicate that responsibility in favor of either relativism or pure explication is to surrender not only its own cause, but the cause of poetry too. Good judges are humble: they temper justice with mercy, with a recognition of their own ignorance and of the mystery in decision; but they do judge.

Why does criticism too often tend to "barbarous exfoliation" (a barbarous enough phrase itself)? People like to expound, to be self-wise—that is one reason. Another is that the need to classify can become manic. Men cannot think without categorizing and distinguishing. Good criticism comes from hard thinking. Contempt for system can be a guise for indolence (and is often formularized into an indolent system—Emerson, Isaiah Berlin). But men can classify in, literally, thousands of ways. And classification can breed itself.<sup>2</sup> It needs checks. It is, in fact, a part of Fancy in the neo-classical sense, which needs the constraint of Judgment. To constrain is to select; to select presumes standards of what is essential and what is real. Good criticism needs to be grounded in serious and right belief.

The purpose of this book is to contend that the neo-classical theory of poetry meets these requirements and that romantic and modern theory does not. The neo-classical is the better theory because it is true and consequently of more use.

It is on the use I shall insist. The first part of this book, on theory, leads to the second, longer part, on certain poems. The theory leads to judgment and, I hope, illumination. The second part also leads back to the first. The discussions are examples. They are intended to show that neo-classical theory is more useful than the romantic in the understanding of *any* poetry, including romantic and modern poems.

What is the neo-classical theory? First, it is not a theory, a competing notion in a world of sects. It is *the* critical theory, uniting Greece and Rome to the Renaissance, extending well into the eighteenth century, having some deep and central liaisons with medieval theory,<sup>3</sup> and its chief concepts still persist, though covertly, in good criticism. It is not even, as the word is nowadays usually understood, a *theory*. It is certain ideas put forward, discussed, quarreled over, made more deep or shallow, over a period of centuries. To be used now—and it can and should be used now—it needs not sterile and parroted imitation, but a genuine emulation, a bringing of its sound concepts to bear on our modern poetry and criticism. It needs refreshing; but it also needs remembering. This chapter will deal, briefly and argumentatively, with some of the chief concepts.

I make no claim to deal with all of the neo-classical concepts, in this chapter or in the book. Little will be said about the important ideas of *inventio*, *dispositio*, *elocutio*;<sup>4</sup> about ornament; about *énargeia*; even about the three unities, or about the over-simple linguistic assumptions. I am not attempting to make a fair historical estimate of neo-classical ideas or of the corresponding practice. I am defending the central neo-classical theory because it is true; this work attempts the freedom of emulation: I reapply and extend, or simply disagree, as I please—but, in so doing, I shall try to make clear what was said as well as what may be said. History has its rights. So does truth.

The first concept is imitation. Poems imitate experience. They are “about” something.<sup>5</sup> Aristotle in the *Poetics* speaks the original and definitive word. “Imitation is natural to man from childhood.”<sup>6</sup> The appeal to childhood, an age intimately bound up with romantic and modern theories of self-expression, is pleasant and not to be put by. One can support it by an observation. Children do like to imitate. It

is natural. Four-year-olds do some very striking abstract designs with crayons; only to them their pictures are anything but abstract: they represent (unrecognizable) postmen, cowboys, trees, what have you; so one learns by asking.

The best defense of the concept is the overwhelming obviousness of its truth. Literature is about life, its actualities and possibilities, and it conveys attitudes towards its subject. The most imposing objection is that literature is not merely a window, even a colored window. Each work of art is a something in itself, an achieved form, that pleases for more and other reasons than its power of likeness. True enough, but no refutation. As we shall see, neo-classical theory deals with this fact more adequately than other theories: in its idea of "profit and delight," in its notion of genre, in its idea of "a grace beyond the reach of art."<sup>7</sup> The imitation is not mere imitation. It is something in itself, too. Dryden wisely calls it an "image."

The second concept is propriety. Aristotle writes: "Epic . . . [like] Tragedy . . . [is] an imitation of serious subjects in a grand kind of verse."<sup>8</sup> The assumption is simple and yet to be refuted. Some subjects deserve one kind of treatment, some another. Style should be proper (fit, appropriate) to subject. One can offer a very simple defense of the notion: its denial is a self-contradiction. The improper is—improper, that is, wrong.

That argument suggests a difficulty: is not then the concept of propriety merely a tautology, merely a way of saying that style should be what it should be? In a sense, no. For "propriety" has a historical content. In a sense, yes. But, being a tautology, it is true, and it carries a very important assumption very hard to deny: the possibility of a right style and technique, the reality of just feeling. Such a style is right, not apart from the conditions, but precisely within its conditions. That is what the word "propriety" means.

To deny the meaningfulness of the idea of "just feeling" is to cast forth on some very odd logical ground, from which one can praise or blame nothing (including one's own theories). It is also to deny the experience of mankind. Oedipus and Lear—in different, but very grand styles on very grand subjects—have pleased many and pleased long. The very fact that we laugh at mock-heroic proves beyond answer that we recognize conflict between style and subject (of course that very conflict is proper to the genre of the mock-heroic). To recognize conflict is to imply the possibility of accommodation. The accommodation is the standard by which we recognize conflict. Anyone who has once laughed with Cervantes or Pope has committed himself irrevocably to the principle of propriety, let his theories be what they may.

These two ideas govern the others, which are probable rather than certain, which admit of more hesitation, which need mediation.<sup>9</sup> What is crucial to neo-classical theory is its belief that good poems are proper imitations, and it stands or falls—in the long run—with that belief. The contention of this book is that, being true, it has stood and will stand.

### *Emulation*

Of the other concepts, the most important is perhaps the idea of emulation. Once more we may turn to Aristotle, for clarity and simplicity if not for authority. He defines emulation in the *Rhetoric* (he is speaking of behavior in general, not of poetry, but the definition applies): "Emulation is pain caused by seeing the presence, in persons whose nature is like our own, of good things that are highly valued . . . ; but it is felt not because others have these goods, but because we have not got them ourselves. It is

therefore a good feeling felt by good persons, whereas envy is a bad feeling felt by bad persons."<sup>10</sup>

The ideal is powerfully expressed in the fifth sonnet of Wordsworth's *Personal Talk*, a good feeling felt by a good person:

Blessings be with them—and eternal praise,  
Who gave us nobler loves, and nobler cares—  
The Poets, who on earth have made us heirs  
Of truth and pure delight by heavenly lays!  
Oh! might my name be numbered among theirs,  
Then gladly would I end my mortal days.

I chose Wordsworth to show it is hardly a sentiment confined to a special period with a period style. Emulation—to shift from the feeling to the activity—is also a fact. All poets learn and perform by vying with earlier poets, by learning, imitating, absorbing, re-forming, rebelling from, making their own. The process includes "imitation," but it is much more. Nor is it merely other poets a poet emulates and transforms: he uses and makes over ideas, spiritual methods, history, many human forms of experience. Poets are human beings; emulation is an essential civilizing activity.

Variations exist in the degree of imitation and of consciousness of emulative activity; and these variations matter. It is a long way from, say, anonymous Elizabethan lyrists to Walt Whitman; but even Whitman has the sea, Biblical rhetoric, and the English Romantics (and his ideas are sometimes in a bad sense imitative). What a good many modern critics and poets (one may include painters) imitate most is the principle of individual autonomy and original expression, hence walk in persistent contradiction.<sup>11</sup>

The line between genuine emulation and servile imitation of past poets is hard to define. One defines it by judg-



ment, not formula. No poet or critic escapes the need for such judgment. All freedom is within, not apart from, one's inheritance. Tradition—the weight of the good past sustaining the individual—fades, in weak hands, into mere convention, truth being dulled and formularized into a simplifying public shorthand. The romantic anti-traditionalists are so far right. But in throwing out the very notion of tradition, they cut themselves off from sustenances, and put their followers (who work and think in their anti-traditional tradition) in a hopeless logical position. It is a strength of the neo-classical tradition that, whatever its occasional failures, it stresses judgment and living emulation. It also knows something, and has something to teach, of the limits of freedom: man rises by effort to freedom from where he is.

### *The Universal*

The neo-classical insists on the universal, the romantic on the individual. So it is often said, and truly said, but I would insist on the “insists.” Neo-classical theory insists on the one; it does not exclude the other; its theory provides a frame that can comprehend the real partial truth of the romantic ideal of the importance of the individual. Romantic theory does not provide such a frame.

The exclusion of either individual or universal is, for that matter, impossible. The universal sustains and needs the individual, the individual the universal. One need not move very far into the analytic maze to see that a general notion suggests its instances. Classes usually have members. Or to see that the “individual” is itself a concept, a universal.

Still, the traditional preference is plain, from Aristotle through Johnson. That preference shows itself in various ways: in the attention given to the Ideal (romantic theory,

quite inconsistently, does too); in the appeal to man's widespread experience, in the conceptualizing of moral truth in "sentences"; at its worst in the grotesque and ossified typing of dramatic character that Thomas Rymer belabors *Othello* with,<sup>12</sup> a kind of procedure that goes back at least to Horace's *Art of Poetry*, where it is innocent and useful.<sup>13</sup>

Differences between kinds of people exist; poets, who imitate nature (reality) need to observe them. Tact, judgment are the keys; if some neo-classical criticism has tended to stiffen non-essential categories, it has done so in violation of its fundamental theory. For a proper imitation of mankind will give the individual and the general their proper due. Dryden in the *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* is shrewd on this point. He distinguishes between the "passions" (general) and the "humours" (individualizing), and he has one character successfully attack the argument of another on the grounds that the typing of the ancients fails to imitate the passion and variety of human life.<sup>14</sup> One of the permanent and universal truths about human nature is, he implies, that men are individuals, and an adequate art will imitate that truth, too.

The taste for moral sentences, however often maligned, is surely one of the most universal of poetic and human phenomena. Here the Romantics and the Victorians share a taste with earlier writers (Byron and Oscar Wilde thrive on the reversal of moral sentences), and one can make an extensive collection from modern poems.<sup>15</sup> Men like to understand their experience; their most important experience is moral (almost by the definition of "important"); men understand by concepts—in the face of these truths, the contempt for moral sentences is perverse.

One can defend the universal by a rather ugly term extremely popular of late: communication. To communicate at all requires a shared language and some common atti-



tudes (even if the primary attitude shared is nothing more than a temporary mutual forbearance for the sake of communication). The perfectly original would be the totally incommunicable. The degree and stretch of communication depends on the width and depth of the sharing. What pleases many and pleases long, to use Samuel Johnson's phrase, must partake to some degree of the universal. However, since all men do not share all truth, communication is necessarily imperfect. An art that achieved the universally true would not, it follows, be universally appreciated. Some men would deny its truth. The correspondence between artistic excellence and pleasing many and pleasing long is, like other secondary rules, rough and useful. As Johnson argued,<sup>16</sup> art that endures survives local and temporary advantages and disadvantages: to do so, it must sound human nature as it permanently is. It must be "a just representation of general [human] nature."<sup>17</sup> This phrase neither implies that such knowledge is easy to come by nor denies the variety of human experience. It assumes them both. Truth is hard to achieve. Men are individuals. But men are also men; and wisdom is possible. To deny the second pair of truths—as much modern individualism and relativism do—is to make criticism impossible and thereby to commit instant self-contradiction. For the denial is criticism too.

The temptation to impose facile and sounding universals is a real human temptation. Neo-classical criticism succumbed historically to that temptation on quite a few occasions (so has romantic and modern criticism). Much neo-classical practice, especially post-Renaissance practice, gave too little place to the individual, and to mystery. Romanticism gave them their due (and then some). But these historical weaknesses are not consonant with the best neo-classical theory. It provides for the individual, for the limitations of our knowledge. And romantic theory—to

anticipate an argument to be developed—dissolves theory, and does not do justice even to the best romantic poems.

*Truth, Probability, Delight and Instruction*

An assumption very deep in neo-classical theory is that poetry is meant to be true. This assumption, though highly unpopular in much criticism, is still made by most practicing critics and poets. The poet means something, seriously. The critic praises or blames him for the validity of his meaning, even though the word "truth" may be hidden in wraps under some term like "tough" or "perceptive" or "sound" or "full."

The relation of truth to poetry is, to be sure, baffling. Poets mean what they say; therefore poems are meant to be true. Poems are inventions, fictions; therefore they are not meant to be true.<sup>18</sup> The critical problem here is the accommodation rather than the resolution of these two truths. At least, I am convinced—after reading many critics and some aestheticians—that the problem is unsolved.<sup>19</sup> My defense of neo-classical theory is that it does accommodate the difficulties, without imposing monistic solutions or abandoning the problem.

The accommodation works mainly through two concepts: (1) probability, or verisimilitude; (2) delight and instruction.

Few terms are more important or less susceptible to simple definition than "probable." The English word goes back etymologically to the Latin *probabilis* which means the "provable," and which extends to such meanings as acceptable, commendable, proper. Perhaps the best single synonym of the term is "convincing," that which convinces an audience, but even here one needs the idea of a *fit* audience and is led back, once again, to the idea of the proper.

The most limiting meanings are the three ordinary ones: the arithmetically probable; that which accords with workaday experience and expectations; or that which accords with more or less arbitrary rules of poetic usage—type characters, the three dramatic unities, and the like. With respect to the last meaning, certainly common in neo-classical practice, we should remember that the appeal to nature from the rules is left open since, as we have already seen, the rules concerned are derived and secondary, the proper imitation of nature the essential rule.

The normal emphasis in Aristotle, Jonson, Boileau, Pope, Dryden is not on the narrow senses, but on a wider one: verisimilitude. The verisimilar, the lifelike, is a notion given subtle and flexible play. Since poetry is *life-like*, it is in a sense true; it is also in a sense not true; the exact shape and the ground or grounds of the likeness need not be defined; they can be intuited, mediated. Probability is thus a highly useful concept, and it appears, covertly, in all practical criticism. What does not convince, does not please. What violates our sense of coherence does not convince. Our sense of coherence derives from a wide experience of what is proper in human experience. Such a notion is not narrow in any sense. By this standard, intelligently applied, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is a beautifully probable poem. Once more, the neo-classical theory is sound, even when the practice may tend to stiffen the theory.

### *Instruction and Delight*

The paired ideas of instruction and delight go back to a famous passage in Horace's *Art of Poetry*: "Poets wish to profit or to delight, or to say things that are at once pleasant and true-to-life."<sup>20</sup>

Instruction came to be normally interpreted as primar-

ily the conveying of moral truth but is not restricted to that meaning; delight means the pleasure of all sorts one gets from a poem. But the most important word of the three is "and," the least definitive connective in our language. I was irritated for years by the vagueness of the phrase; but the strength resides in the vagueness. Poetry does instruct and delight; the relations are manifold; and an attempt at exhaustive definition would, as Samuel Johnson said in a different context, "but show the narrowness of the definer." Compared to the freedom in the phrase "to profit and to delight," the romantic idea of "organic form" is a strait-jacket (as I shall argue further in Chapter 2).

Yet the relationships have not been left wide open. That would be the abdication of thought. The neo-classical tradition spied and permitted several relationships; and neo-classical theory can, by consistent extension, allow more.

First, there is the delight people, from childhood up, take in imitation. There is the delight in moral instruction, the deep pleasure Milton must have taken in writing, "All is best, though we oft doubt,/ What th' unsearchable dispose/ Of highest wisdom brings about,/ And ever best found in the close." There is the delight in contemplating beauty in the subject (as in Thomas Campion's "Rose-cheeked Laura, come,/ Sing thou smoothly with thy beauty's/ Silent music, either other/ Sweetly gracing."); the delight in the just response of blame to evil or praise to good (Shakespeare's sonnets "The expense of spirit in a waste of shame" and "Let me not to the marriage of true minds"); the delight in artistic control (Ben Jonson's "Wouldst thou hear what man can say/ In a little? Reader, stay.") There is the pleasure of sympathizing with the poet, a pleasure the Romantics gave full credit to, and which is, by a logical extension of neo-classical theory, a proper response of the reader to the artist, the artist being a partial subject of

the poem as well as a person and the poem's maker. Romantic theory has shown illogic in claiming uniqueness for romantic poems and expecting sympathy for the poet. For exactly to the degree that anything is uniquely individual it is precisely unavailable for sympathy, for the reader's sharing. What is shared is not unique. One must grant the illogic great strategic and historical success, but that does not make it less contradictory.

The relations between delight and instruction do not all move one way. Delight helps instruction by making it attractive. In extreme forms, this becomes the "sugar-coated pill" theory, a theory which has always struck me as crude and repellent. The theory also seems inconsistent with the notion of propriety, since it assumes that such delight is superimposed rather than naturally appropriate. At best, it is one way and but one way of leading a morally confused yet aesthetically responsive audience to some sense of the beauty of morality.<sup>21</sup> Samuel Johnson tends toward this position, but with some generality and subtlety, and much variety of application. He wrote, "Poetry is the art of uniting pleasure with truth, by calling imagination to the help of reason,"<sup>22</sup> which might or might not mean sugar to the pill. That surely is not all it means.

Delight, thought of as just, *is* moral. It is good to rejoice with what is good, to lament over what is lamentable. The just correspondence of the emotions with the situation and with the moral truth about the situation *is* the most important liaison between delight and instruction.

That correspondence is also the point of balance of the best freedom neo-classicism affords: the privilege of arguing from both ends. Take Dryden. He sometimes insists on effect, insists that what genuinely delights must be proper, whatever (secondary) rules it may violate. When he speaks so, he sounds "liberal" and pre-romantic. At other times, he



argues that, since the rules are properly based in nature, art that accords with them is sound and any reader who fails to be pleased is in error. When he speaks so, he may sound to modern ears like a pedant contemptuous of experience. Yet the theory provides for both emphases. What pleases a good judge must be sound. What is sound should please a good judge. The rules and the audience check each other: it is good they do since neither is infallible.<sup>23</sup>

That flexibility is lost in several modern attempts to deal with instruction and delight. Allen Tate asks "how the moral intelligence gets into poetry" (in our terms, what the relation is of instruction to delight) and replies, "It gets in not as moral abstractions, but as form, coherence of image and metaphor, control of tone and rhythm, the union of these features."<sup>24</sup> So indeed it does, and Tate has made a distinguished contribution to our understanding of it. But it also, in Tate's poetry as well as in Johnson's, does get in as statement, as moral statement. I think of the splendid didactic rage of *More Sonnets at Christmas*.

The Chicago critics<sup>25</sup> wisely wish to distinguish poems according to the genres and take a wide and careful look at the types of criticism practiced, during which they score quite a few points against some modern critics.<sup>26</sup> Their work is of great value.

But their distinctions can be frightfully pat. Witness Olson. "It [mimetic poetry—he gives comedy, tragedy, and epic as examples] does not engage our interest and emotions in particulars of the action in order to instruct us . . . ; . . . it instructs us . . . in order to engage our emotions."<sup>27</sup> That is, in mimetic poetry instruction is entirely subsumed under delight (and in didactic poetry, he goes on to say, quite the reverse).<sup>28</sup> That is a painful simplification that makes a liar out of Milton, who wishes to "justify the ways of God to men" in *Paradise Lost*, and of the many other

poets whose intent, professed and inferable, has been both to delight and to instruct. The statement does not even seem to me to square with Aristotle, though the Chicago critics claim he very consistently relates all structure to emotional effect as end.<sup>29</sup> They may be right. If so, Aristotle should not have simplified, and later neo-classical theory is an improvement. But I worry, at least, about Aristotle's statement: "Hence poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are . . . universals . . . *which is the aim of poetry.*"<sup>30</sup> Nor does the definition of the play as an "imitation of action" insist on the emotion as final cause. He implies that the plot is the final cause when he calls it the "first essential," the "soul" of the play.

Nor has there ever been a good didactic poet who did not take pleasure in his skill as such, and wish, among other things, to give a corresponding pleasure to his audience. Of course, the epic may be more concerned with effect, the didactic poem with instruction, but each is concerned with and yields (if successful) both instruction and delight. The traditional theory remains more inclusive than definitions of the definers.

This includes even the best of the definers. Yvor Winters is one of the best. His theory is not narrow, but supple and logically tough. He subsumes delight under instruction, but avoids pure didacticism by a theory—a good neo-classical theory as far as it goes—of appropriateness of response to sound statement. But in the theory all the feeling comes in response to the statement and subject. What his theory has no room for is the delight of artistry itself, a joy that can accompany the most plangent and sincere of responses (I think of parts of Tennyson's *In Memoriam* or Winters' own great lyric, *To the Holy Spirit*). Winters does allow for a sense of spiritual control and transfers some

aesthetic responses to that. But such self-control and the pleasure in, say, good metrical functioning, while intricately related, are still different things. What he has done is to reinstate the moral in our criticism and to show some sound relations between instruction and delight. It is an important service, and Winters is a great critic in *the* great tradition. But he has not finally resolved the multiple relations of instruction and delight.



# 2

## *Fancy and Judgment*

THE NEO-CLASSICAL division of fancy and judgment, like the division of delight and instruction, gains freedom by leaving some problems unsolved. The theory is simple, open-ended, and true: it maintains, first, that fancy and judgment are both necessary in good poetry, and, second, that judgment is in charge. Fancy, finally, must submit to judgment. It is, however, no tame submission. Fancy has its rights, its powers, and its moments when it outsoars judgment, to snatch a grace no rules can reach.

The theory seems to me, as far as it goes and that is quite far, almost perfectly true. My only objection is that it allows some exceptions to the supremacy of judgment. At the risk of sounding like a wooden foe to all joy, I shall insist firmly that judgment is always (in Dryden's phrase) the "master workman" in a poem.

The reason is simple. Poets write poems on purpose. When the poem is done, the poet signs his name to it and submits it to be made public. He consciously takes the responsibility for it. This is true irrespective of how the poet composed the poem—in opium, asleep, under direct dicta-

tion of his *daemon*, in madness, in cold mechanical determination, in calm and deep recollection. The poem is *his*; he revises it or decides not to; he takes the responsibility for it. And if that is not an act of judgment (good or bad!), where is an act of judgment to be found? Nor does the fact that judgments themselves share in imagination damage my case. Imagination plays a part in all our decisions. The division of any activity into judgment and imagination is a division for convenience. It is, however, a convenient and true description of our mental life, and within it judgment *means* the element of responsible, free, and rational control.

One of the most powerful moments in Coleridge's criticism supports the argument. In it he accused the neo-classical critics of what I would call not being neo-classical enough. "In nine places out of ten in which I find . . . [Shakespeare's] awful name mentioned, it is with some epithet of 'wild,' 'irregular,' 'pure child of nature,' . . . [or the like]. If all this be true, we must submit to it: tho' to a thinking mind it cannot but be painful to find any excellence, merely human, thrown out of all human analogy, and thereby leaving us neither rules for imitation, nor motives to imitate. . . ."<sup>1</sup>

Coleridge goes on to explain Shakespeare's perfection by the idea of "organic form," which, by making each form totally unique and unpredictable, leaves us in truth "neither rules for imitation, nor motives to imitate." And he is, a bit earlier, wantonly unfair to the Shakespearian criticism of Dryden, Pope, and Johnson. They revered, but they also judged, and Coleridge is too bound by his reverence to allow the presence of judgment except as the circular and yeasaying aftermath of reverence for Shakespeare and of belief in "the shaping power of imagination." But his point is still well taken. Neo-classical criticism is too quick to admit limits it does not have, to turn from judgment to wonder.

Shakespeare is, after all, *by* neo-classical standards, the greatest of poets and dramatists. The power and propriety and truth of his imitation of life, his enormous emulative power to transform his sources, the might of his fancy and judgment, the splendid "beauties" that justify his "faults" (to bring in, in passing, a neo-classical notion I do not elsewhere discuss), the universality of his appeal—these qualities *fit* the fundamental canons of neo-classical theory. Shakespeare is great precisely because he obeys the rules. If that statement sounds like monstrous paradox, it is because of the widespread and grotesque misconception of what the rules in the best neo-classical theory are. Shakespeare makes proper imitations of nature; he mightily delights and instructs. His judgment, as Coleridge loved to say, is equal to his imagination. These *are* the rules.

What is—in neo-classical theory—this fancy that judgment allows, co-operates with, and restrains? It is certainly less than the mysterious and hypostasized Coleridgean "imagination," but a good bit more than what he distinguishes from that imagination and calls "fancy." (In earlier criticism, "imagination" and "fancy" were close synonyms.)<sup>2</sup> In its wider meaning, a synonym is "genius," which Johnson calls "that power which constitutes a poet; that quality without which judgment is cold, and knowledge is inert; that energy which collects, combines, amplifies, and animates. . . ."<sup>3</sup> The normal distinction made between fancy and imagination in Coleridgean theory is that fancy is a combining power, imagination a fusing one.<sup>4</sup> The distinction is valid and useful,<sup>5</sup> but fancy to Dryden or Johnson or Hobbes is a much more lively power than the coldly ingenious fancy Coleridge speaks of. It is, in Dryden's splendid phrase, what gives "the life-touches, and the secret graces" to poetry.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps the best definition is tucked away in that

phrase. Fancy is the *whatever which* gives power and life to poetry. That is to say, the interest in neo-classical criticism is quite properly in the work of art, not the mysterious soul of the maker. The power and life of the *poem* is what criticism is concerned with, and the psychological faculty leads to the poem. The poem is (among other things) communication between one human being and others, and that truth is not forgotten in favor of "pure" consideration of the qualities of form. Lines lead in and out, from author to subject to audience and they can be travelled in any way. But the center of the web is the poem, not the author, and the line leading back to the author is the least travelled strand in neo-classical criticism.

Therefore fancy is a sound critical term, whatever its inadequacy as a term for the depth psychologist or his cousin, the expressionistic critic. Unconscious fusion and the like, sudden leaps and remoldings, are realities of our mental life, in science (and banking for that matter) as well as in poetry; unquestionably those who wrote on fancy knew less about such matters than is known (or confidently—and fancifully—speculated) now;<sup>7</sup> but the gain for psychology has not proved a gain for criticism. It has proved a considerable loss. This is a contentious statement. I shall contend for it.

First—this is summary—fancy is an adequate term. It stands for whatever in the soul produces the mysterious and heartening vigor that all good poetry possesses and that sometimes grows into a mighty flame, the "fire" that Dryden and Pope and the Romantics loved to speak of. And I submit—tautology has its merits—that whatever produces that, produces it. I also submit that we are a long way from really understanding the process.

I have shown that fancy can never be divorced from judgment, that judgment (good or bad) always has the final say. Where sound judgment is lacking, the best things

imagination can make are the "beautiful monsters" Horace and Dryden discussed.

Imagination is, like fire, a great servant but a frightful master. And in romantic theory imagination becomes master, which means the suppression of judgment and the logical abolition of criticism. Again I resort to tautology. If judgment cannot judge, there is no judgment; therefore there is no criticism and, to be quite strict, there cannot even be reverential praise, which is judgment and criticism.

Nor is the judgment of the best neo-classical criticism narrow and rationalistic and frigid. It is real judgment, the power of choosing wisely and imaginatively between alternatives, the power of evaluating experience and life. It is, to be sure, at times a constraining activity; it is, at times, not. If one decides to let go, to swim "with the tide,"<sup>8</sup> to set free Pindaric or Longinian passion, such a decision is judgment and neo-classical theory includes it.

To make imagination the master of poetry and criticism is dangerous for poetry and suicidal for criticism.<sup>9</sup> It is, to use the traditional terms, a submission of reason to passion;<sup>10</sup> and it means a surrender of control and, in the not-so-long run by a not very paradoxical paradox, the loss of power. A harsh and narrow rationalism can stultify emotions, and damage lives as well as poems. But, by neo-classical standards and *by* the fact that such effects follow, such a rationalism fails. The choice is not between two positions that need mediation—on one side a narrow, snarling Reason, on the other a gorgeous, witless Imagination—but between a theory that insists on a living balance of powers under sound control and one that submits all to what is finally a non-rational power.

Coleridge uses a beautiful phrase, "the shaping spirit of imagination." It is, unfortunately, almost totally false. Imagination amplifies, subdues, re-forms, amazes, animates;



but it does not shape. It may at times sufficiently unify a short lyric (though I have my doubts even there); it *helps* to shape longer works: surely not all the beautiful liaisons of image and idea in *Oedipus*, the *Aeneid*, *Phèdre*, and *Antony and Cleopatra* were consciously and extrinsically designed; but where it is alone the "master workman" in a longer work, there will be radical defects of order and consequently of feeling. Hart Crane's *The Bridge* and T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* shall be exhibits in a later chapter. There are always devotees who find order where order is not; but they will not deceive many long.

Further, judging a product by the process by which it was made is a risky and odd business. A book like *The Creative Process*<sup>11</sup> shows convincingly that other people besides poets go through the kind of process to which John Livingston Lowes' *The Road to Xanadu* is the hugest monument. But the works so produced in other fields are *not* judged by whether or not the dark imaginative processes were at work in the producing. They are judged as works. Works of science are verified by scientific methods; poems must be judged by poetic standards.

And of course in fact they are. When Coleridge says in a famous passage on fancy and imagination in the fourth chapter of *Biographia Literaria* that there is a difference "grounded in nature" between Otway's "Lutes, lobsters, seas of milk, and ships of amber" and Shakespeare's "What! have his daughters brought him to this pass?" he did not make the distinction by a biographical and psychological study of Otway and Shakespeare. He made it by a response to the lines themselves (and the remembered context of the verse from *King Lear*). There is, if not a contradiction, at least a great peculiarity in holding that the essential distinguishing mark of great poetry lies in the kind of processes that took place in the soul of the poet, then being able to

identify such processes *only* by the quality of the poem. The argument is circular. The real focus, then, is not the soul of the poet, but the poem itself. The greater verse, by Shakespeare, is profoundly unified; the lesser verse, by Otway, is simply ingenious. We make such a judgment by reading poems, not by psychoanalyzing poets. Here once more neo-classical theory is the sounder. It directs us to the poem: Coleridgean imagination tends to pull us away from the poem.

Another great advantage of the neo-classical ideas as against the Coleridgean one is that fancy and judgment are distinctly subordinate notions in neo-classical theory, while imagination is the central notion in Coleridgean theory. It is a dangerous eminence: in theory it abolishes and in practice badly misleads critical judgment.

Imagination as one of the means of achieving poetic ends is one, and a great, thing; imagination as the end of poetry is another, and a destructively idolatrous, thing. To put imagination on that pinnacle is to throw out the idea of imitation, so that literature no longer speaks to us of life; is to throw out the idea of propriety, so that the very idea of poetry as just evaluation is lost; is to throw out the long poem, because imaginative fusions tend in fact to be short (Coleridge writes, consistently enough, "a poem of any length neither can be, or ought to be, all poetry,"<sup>12</sup> and Poe takes the butchery farther), or else to make associative linkage a pseudo-structural principle for longer poems,<sup>13</sup> which has inestimably damaged most modern attempts at longer poems; is to abandon all the genres with their various kinds of feeling and structure in favor of a single false structural principle of "balance and reconciliation"; is to introduce the concept of "organic form," which, as I shall shortly argue, is a grave for criticism and poetry.

(It contributes also—this outside of poetry and criti-

cism—to a moral attitude Coleridge has no wish to support. Worship is central in man's history and in sound ontology. It is better to worship stones and snakes than to worship nothing. But it is probably better to worship nothing than to worship man's own powers. That worship has become very popular of late, a fact that makes it even deadlier. Idolatry has many consequences, some of them grave. To worship imagination is to idolize man.)

The doctrine of organic form is probably the most influential of all the ideas of romantic criticism. It is the worst of romantic ideas. It has its truth, or at least it starts from a truth, but the cost is too great for the gain. The idea occurs in myriad passages in Coleridge. One of these, which I shall quote in partial context, is in the eighteenth chapter of *Biographia Literaria*:

But if it be asked, by what principles the poet is to regulate his own style . . . I reply; by . . . the principles of grammar, logic, psychology! In one word by such a knowledge of the facts, material and spiritual, that most appertain to his art, as, if it have been governed and applied by *good sense*, and rendered instinctive by habit, becomes the representative and reward of our past conscious reasonings, insights, and conclusions, and acquires the name of TASTE. By what *rule* that does not leave the reader at the poet's mercy, and the poet at his own, is the latter to distinguish between the language suitable to *suppressed*, and the language, which is the characteristic of *indulged*, anger? . . . Is it . . . not . . . by the power of imagination proceeding upon the *all in each* of human nature? . . . [It] is the prerogative of poetic genius to distinguish by parental instinct its proper offspring from the changelings. . . . Could a rule be given from *without*, poetry would cease to be poetry, and sink into a mechanical art. . . . The *rules* of the IMAGINATION are themselves the very powers of growth and production.<sup>14</sup>

The first part of this, through "*all in each* of human nature," is—waiving a quibble or two and substituting



"judgment" for "imagination" in the last sentence—permanently sound (and neo-classical) theory, and reads for all the world like the direct refutation of the latter part. If it is the prerogative of poetic genius to distinguish by instinct, are we not surely at the mercy of the poet and he at his own? Is it his prerogative to call poems good that are bad by the "principles of grammar, logic, and psychology"? And how are we to choose between one of the poet's intuitions and the others? We plainly cannot. How can one poet distinguish what is genius in another? By this rule he cannot. The *reductio* (in fact, immediate consequence) of the position is that everything written by any person who has ever felt himself a genuine poet is beyond criticism. The rules of imagination are, then, no rules at all. Or, rather, they are rules that justify all attempts at poetry as equally excellent; whatever grows, grows, and is self-justifying, and that is no means other than the uncorrected and undiscussable intuition of the poet himself to tell whether something has grown or has been coldly built. This is a logical impasse that no amount of wiggling can get the Coleridgean critic out of. Either our imagination and intuition are in some degree in alliance with and correctible by rational judgment, or they are not. If they are correctible, then the organically formed can be partly judged from "without," and there are two principles at work: precisely judgment and fancy, which is what neo-classical theory holds and Coleridge would refute. If imagination and intuition are not correctible and not to be judged, then it is impossible to inform taste by judgment, impossible to improve judgment, impossible to apply grammar, logic, or psychology (or poetic standards), impossible to learn, criticize, or praise.

Coleridge, often and very inconsistently with his primary theory, knew that, and he returns in dozens of places to sound and permanent neo-classical standards. "Good

sense," "correct," "suitable" or their synonyms (all of which mean "proper") are among his favorite words. He says of Shakespeare—I claim the sentence for one of the flowers of neo-classical criticism—that "the creative energy and the intellect wrestle as in a war embrace." But in the central and most influential passages of his criticism the creative energy won such a complete victory that the intellect was cast quite out of the ring. The results have not been happy.

Let us look at another famous passage: "No work of true genius dare want its appropriate form; neither indeed is there any danger of this. As it must not, so neither can it, be lawless! For it is even this that constitutes it genius—the power of acting creatively under laws of its own origination."<sup>15</sup>

The determinism could not be more blunt. Whatever a genius does is automatically sound, and there is no possible way of judging whether a poet is a genius or not. There is no danger of genius ever failing to find its true form. One of the corollaries is that all of Shakespeare's work is exactly equal, so all of Milton's, Dante's, Sophocles'. Their works (and for that matter the work of all poetasters who ever felt themselves to be geniuses) are totally perfect and it is irreverent to judge them. Also impossible. It means that Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, which I shall not quote, is exactly as good and great in achievement and in kind as Milton's *On the University Carrier*, four lines of which I shall quote:

Here lies old *Hobson*, Death hath broke his girt,  
And here, alas, hath laid him in the dirt,  
Or else the ways being foul, twenty to one,  
He's here struck in a slough, and overthrown.

It means that *Hamlet*, in kind and degree, is exactly as good as the most frigid of the sonnets.

It also means, if I may repeat it once more, that it is impossible to distinguish between real and false genius. For *whatever* acts creatively under laws of its own origination is genius; that is what, according to Coleridge, *constitutes* genius. And to judge genius as real or false is to get outside of that rule; from "without" we are incapable of judgment. We must revere Kerouac, then, as much as we do Shakespeare.

In the same passage, Coleridge discusses the metaphor in organic form. "The true ground of the mistake . . . lies in the confounding mechanical regularity with organic form. The form is mechanic when on any given material we impress a pre-determined form, not necessarily arising out of the properties of the material, as when to a mass of wet clay we give whatever shape we wish it to retain when hardened. The organic form, on the other hand, is innate; it shapes as it develops itself from within, and the fullness of its development is one and the same with the perfection of the outward form. Such is the life, such the form."

These words make plain that Coleridge fully intended the implicit metaphor in organic form. Good poems are like trees; they are not like bricks, statues, or buildings. The metaphor impresses; but it is not the whole truth. Both metaphors have their truth, and it is dangerous to throw out either.<sup>16</sup> Poems are like trees, and unlike bricks, in that some of the material comes from "inside" the maker, not outside; they are like trees, and unlike bricks or buildings, in that one cannot make them from blueprints or by machines. They are like bricks and buildings, and radically unlike trees, in that they are deliberately made by human beings. Poets write poems on purpose; poems do not write themselves. They are not even planted; they are written.

The most important limit of the metaphor is a major one: it fells the tree. The composing of poetry is a human

activity; and human activity is not only enormously more complicated, but different in crucial kinds from vegetable activity. Human activity, quite unlike the growing of a tree is, among other things, above other things, conscious, deliberative, revising, thoughtful, passionate, moral, free; and to reduce it to, to limit it by a vegetable analogy, even if with a fervor religious in intensity and quality, is to debase it. Furthermore the "stuff" of poetry is not much like vegetable matter: it is ideas, meanings, human experience. Organic form is a straitjacket. It reduces criticism to nothing; taken seriously, it reduces the poor poet to self-entanglement and automatic writing. *King Lear* did not grow like a tree; William Shakespeare of Stratford and London wrote it; it is, like many other plays, in five acts, about people in high estate, tragic; its story is emulated, not invented, so some of the matter was gotten from "outside"; it did not grow continuously in one direction; it is quite possible the crown "grew" before the trunk; it was most probably revised; it has much meaning of several kinds; it tells us—how much and how deeply!—of human affairs. It is a great poem and play by outside standards; its excellence is discussable. And if these statements are true, the theory of organic form is false.

Let us hear Coleridge once more, still on Shakespeare.

I would try Shakespeare compared with any other writer . . . . Make out your amplest catalogue of all the human faculties—as reason or the moral law, the will, the . . . conscience, . . . prudence, wit, fancy, imagination, judgment—and then [of] the objects on which these can be employed, as the beauties of nature, the terrors or seeming caprices of nature, the realities and the capabilities . . . of the human mind, conceived as individual or as social being, as in innocence or guilt, in a play-paradise or a war-field of temptation—and then compare with him under each of these heads [any other writer].<sup>17</sup>

If we stick to English literature, very few serious critics doubt the results of such a trial. And, if we include all the literature of our Western tradition, Shakespeare may well overreach Homer, Sophocles, Virgil, Dante. The passage from Coleridge is, like many another passage by him, a great and noble statement of judicial criticism. But where is his theory of organic form? Gone. Are the rules applied here the laws of Shakespeare's own origination? Hardly. If the theory of organic form were applied here, there would be no one competent to judge, and the result would be, not Shakespeare's victory, but a universal and debilitating tie. No, the rules applied here are the old ones I contend for: Shakespeare is justly praised for making proper imitations of human nature, for delighting and instructing. Coleridge often drops his glowing theories of imagination and organic form when it comes time to criticize (because those theories are of no *use* to the practicing critic), and turns back to the permanent tradition of criticism, a tradition caught in a phrase of Dryden's when he wrote that a poem should be "a just and lively image of . . . nature . . . for the delight and instruction of mankind."<sup>18</sup>

John Dennis wrote, "Poetry . . . is an art, by which a poet excites passion . . . in order to satisfy and improve, to delight and to reform the mind."<sup>19</sup>

So in fact it is.

# 3

## *The Genres*

FOR OVER a century and a half, the genres have been under attack, most severely in Croce's *Aesthetics*; they have been granted new respect of late, eminently in the brilliant scholarship of Rosemond Tuve, and some serious efforts have been made, notably by Austin Warren and René Wellek, Northrop Frye, and Susanne Langer,<sup>1</sup> to reassess and to reclassify them.

Organic form, taken seriously, abolishes *any* theory of the genres. Each poem grows according to the laws of its own origination, any "outside" judgment is condemned; each poem is consequently unique, *sui generis*, and there are as many kinds as there are poems, all quite incomparable.

To be sure, the metaphor of growth in and by itself does not dismiss classification. After all, there are apple trees and pines.<sup>2</sup> And as R. H. Fogle correctly shows us,<sup>3</sup> Coleridge talks a good bit about the kinds and, one may add, about what is proper to them. But that is Coleridge's inconsistency; almost all of his sound criticism is at odds with his notion of organic form. For organic form, combined with the idea that each poem originates its own laws, does



unmistakably exclude the kinds, *any* kind whatever, and much modern criticism has hammered out the corollary with muscular zest.

Croce assails the "error . . . known as the *theory of artistic and literary kinds*":

From [this] . . . theory . . . derive those erroneous modes of judgment and of criticism, thanks to which, instead of asking before a work of art if it be expressive and what it expresses, . . . they ask if it obey the *laws* of epic or of tragedy, of historical painting or of landscape. While making a verbal pretence of agreeing, or yielding a feigned obedience, artists have, however, really always disregarded these *laws of the kinds*. Every true work of art has violated some established kind and upset the ideas of the critics, who have thus been obliged to broaden the kinds, until finally even the broadened kind has proved too narrow, owing to the appearance of new works of art, naturally followed by new scandals, new upsettings and—new broadenings.<sup>4</sup>

He bases this argument on a holistic view of intuition which is strongly Coleridgean—whether he derive it from Coleridge or continental versions of the theory or both or neither—in its commitment to the metaphors of "fusion" and "organic." He holds that a work of art is indivisible because every "expression is a single expression. Activity is a fusion of the impressions in an organic whole."<sup>5</sup>

Croce, like Coleridge, and like Suzanne Langer, sees such an "expressionist" theory as liberating. Poor poets, realizing the truth, can escape from the tyranny of the pedants and the past, the miserably few permitted genres, into their true freedom and to an infinity of genres, each new poem constituting (precisely, no more or less) a new kind.

He could not be more wrong, nor is there any theory that more enslaves the poet. Instead of being ushered into freedom, the poet is clapped into the prison of a single and

special kind, the associative lyric whose principle is intense emotional connection and fusion. Nor is the poet allowed to communicate with his peers, either dead or living. He cannot emulate them, he cannot absorb them, he cannot use their forms. Nor can he be waited on any longer by his servants the critics whose "laws of style," however empiric or quack or *a priori* (or intelligent), have done his predecessors some useful service.

For the poet is not freed from rules or from laws of styles by Croce's theory. There is no freedom from law. He is committed to a single law of style: the law of organic unity, of expression, and the many and flexible possibilities of the traditional genres narrow down to one inflexible rule. The image, the condensed romantic image, becomes all.<sup>6</sup> All techniques except the intense and organic binding of images becomes either precluded—the poetry of the Symbolists and Surrealists approach that norm, where even syntax becomes vain<sup>7</sup>—or subsumed under a monistic and irrational principle. Organic unity is a vegetable activity (or, at most, one of the unconscious animal activities); it is not good enough to serve as an ideal for a deliberating and purposive animal. In fact, it is not good enough for vegetables. The seed, given water and earth and sunlight, grows: its fate is to be a particular tree—so far organic form makes sense; but its fate is also to be a member of its species, to be a certain kind of tree, sycamore or ginkgo or plum—and the argument against classes breaks down.

One does not need to turn to a professional examination of Croce's aesthetic concepts<sup>8</sup> to prove his argument wrong. For it plainly contravenes verifiable historical fact to say that artists have "really always disregarded these *laws* of style." Many artists testify very clearly, by precept and the example of their work, that they have been much concerned with genres and laws: Horace, Dante, Boccaccio, Chaucer,



Tasso, Campion, Daniel, Spenser, Jonson, Racine, Corneille, Boileau, Milton, Dryden, Pope, Johnson, Arnold, Eliot are obvious examples; and one can add Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Shakespeare, in fact any poet who ever laid successful pen to paper.

Croce does describe a "dialectic," a historical give-and-take, and I am glad to accept his last phrase: "new upsettings and new enlargements." A give-and-take of literary history does exist, but it is far from being as simple as Croce makes it. In his dialectic, hateful, narrow, blindly unimaginative critics throw up arbitrary laws which free, imaginative, noble poets briskly escape. After all, many a distinguished time, the critic is the poet. The genres change, because poets work in them emulatively, whether well or badly; the lesser rules, being imperfect and secondary, are challenged, obeyed, contorted, improved, damaged, enlarged by poets (and critics, who supply the dialectic with energy too), who would obey the fundamental rule, that the poet is to make a pleasing and fitting image of reality. Without genres, however loose; without laws, however limited, there is no give-and-take, no dialectic and the poet is left with the poor freedom of following sub-rational impulses he has not learned, cannot understand, and cannot control.

One may approach the question of the genres in a different way, by asking, "Are there essential classes? At least, are some classes more necessary, more nearly essential, than others?" The first question has given trouble to every philosopher from Plato and Aristotle on. I am convinced the answer is "yes," but would not like to have to defend my conviction technically. The answer to the second is plainly "yes." The definition of man as a "rational animal" has its difficulties and limitations, but is clearly more central than "a fig-eating animal." Reasoning is a more important and typical human activity than the eating of figs.

In literature, "epic"—which I here crudely define as "a non-dramatic poem of great size and scope dealing with extremely important events in narrative"—is a more necessary, typical, and important class, critically as well as historically, than is "a poem with eight per cent feminine endings." Further, a good epic is greater, in size and value, than a good limerick. Grant that much, and the possibility and importance of genre theory is established, though it does not follow that the genres are, historically or logically, fixed and prescriptive forms. Are they? No. Are they, then, completely free, mere historical accidents? No. Men have, in some part, *decided* to use them. Hence they are purposive, meaningful forms. Are there some sure rules for them? Yes. The epic should have a noble and serious style, although (here much neo-classical theory was wrong) it does not have to be a high, pure, unmixed style. The audience must feel a sense of completeness; the poem should have scope; its actions should be one and entire. These are surely real rules. Nor do such ideas exclude mock-epic. In fact, they make it possible. Mock-epic is a different kind from epic, with different natural rules. It is meant to mock the epic or to mock the low by epic standards, or to show more oblique and "ironic" relationships than the epic by a varying mixture of levels of style and subject. Its historical existence is made possible by the previous existence of the epic and by a sense of propriety of level of style to subject. These are two conditions without which mock-epic could not be.

Lofty ideals often get mocked. Irony yields pleasure. Grant these two truths, and mock-epic becomes a likely and natural result of epic. But its existence was not strictly predictable; it might not have come to be; and its structure is not an *inference* from epic or from human nature. The mixture is odd, but firmly typical of the genres. They are historical, which is to say to some measure resistant to cate-

gorical formulation. They carry with them some of the shagginess, the unexpectedness, of real life. But, since they exist *for* the pleasure and instruction of people, they are still in large measure intelligible: they can be given some working definitions; they are recognizable; they can be chosen or rejected, changed and preserved. Certain qualities are naturally proper to some, others to others. One can err, then, in the discussion of genres, by denying their intelligibility and usefulness (as in the theory of organic form), or by too neatly categorizing them, by making them discrete, static, and prescriptive, a vice of which neo-classical theory and practice has been often accused.

How far is the charge true? How limited—fixed and prescriptive—are neo-classical ideas of particular genres? Sometimes pretty narrow. Good ideas get ossified. There is narrowness in Horace's depiction of permissible dramatic types, in the French Academy's attack on *Le Cid*, in Boileau, Rapin, Rymer, le Bossu, even in parts of Pope's *Essay on Criticism*.

But, as I have said before, I am not very much concerned in this book with historical justification or judgment. I do not, for instance, have much desire to defend Boileau's criticism. His value is great. But his beloved "*raison*" is, I fear, the narrowing, not the liberating kind; the imperative mode and the tone of grave authority have their power; they also make his most trivial and mistaken gesture of taste sound as though it were as important as the most fundamental rules he expresses, a situation which undermines any hierarchy of value as quickly as relativism does. His remarks on the lesser genres can sound remarkably picayune. The pastoral, he says, must be simple and ingenuous in style; to attempt grandeur in it is folly; the elegy must always be about love and must be written by a poet really in love. Taken seriously, a belief in the genres did give us *Lycidas*.

Taken seriously, these notions would make *Lycidas* impossible, or impossibly bad.

Much of Boileau's theory is bad theory; a fair amount of neo-classical theory is like it. Such theory comes, however, not from extending basic principles but from violating them. It violates Dryden's clear knowledge that the primary rules are fixed, the secondary unsure and subject to mediation. Whenever codification becomes a vice in neo-classical theory or practice, the fundamental rules have been crossed: mediation has failed. Such narrow theory also wantonly violates the principle of emulation. For, if the poet absorbs, transforms, vies with the work of the past, he will modify the forms in his efforts. That in fact is what does happen: this is what the principle of emulation makes happen.

Prescriptions like the narrow ones of Boileau's are also indecorous. They fail to observe the fullness of propriety. For poems are to be proper, not only to genre, but to subject, occasion, audience, intent, morality. The individual decides and remolds, even when he remolds at his peril. Genre theory that, like Boileau's, rests on a narrowed and inflexible propriety is—by the fundamental neo-classical rules—wrong. Of course neo-classical critics did not always realize that (Dryden is the shining exception), but that does not affect my argument: I am trying to save the theory, not the critics or a literary period.

Boileau's genres are a scramble. That is to his credit. Pastoral, satire, epigram, sonnet are four of his several genres. But (as Boileau apparently did not notice) they represent, respectively, four distinct methods of classification: by subject (shepherds), by attitude toward the subject (blame), by kind of wit (brief and pointed), and by metrical organization (fourteen lines and such). Boileau cares for narrow rules, but not for systems of classifications. The genres are to him historical facts.

And that is their real importance. The kinds are what in fact poets have to work with, and poets cannot work without them. This is as true today as ever. Poets today write, mostly, personal, meditative, associational lyrics. They write them because that kind is the living, available tradition; and poets tend to stumble or become numb, artificial, or chaotic when they attempt the larger forms.<sup>9</sup> Poets in the Renaissance and seventeenth century had a greater number of living genres available to them than poets since. The shrinkage has been radical, though some genres have survived the belief in them. The causes are many and obscure: codification perhaps, though the processes involved in the coding are what had helped keep the genres alive; a new, French insistence on elegance and sophistication and the "proper" in the worst sense; the contracting and idolatrous "Reason" of the Enlightenment; the shift of world view from teleological to mechanical to various; the enormous success of the genre—rather genres, Horatian, Juvenalian, Popeian—of satire; the quasi-scientific suspicion of rhetorical figures and consequently of both propriety and the grand style—all played their part.

One thing is sure. The sense of decorum, of hierarchical value applied and reapplied by awake and subtle and mediating judgment, the sense of the genres as real, made living tradition possible.

The details of the decorum were arguable, and argued. One could, with the best of freedoms, reason from effect to the cause which is the poem and its "causes"<sup>10</sup> or from the poem to the effect it should have. Such freedom gives the permanent value to a piece of semi-formal critical dialectic, Dryden's *Essay of Dramatic Poesy*. Or, earlier, it meant that Daniel and others argued that there is fitness in the English kinds and conventions because (the phrase is Rosemond Tuve's) "great poetry has established their



decorum.”<sup>11</sup> Yet when a given propriety is established, whether by critics or practice, poets tend to use it, and they feel tension when they pull away from it or change it. The historical stuff is not limp in their hands; it bristles.

On one side, the narrow prescriptions of Boileau; on the other, the more narrow prescriptions of Coleridge and Croce. In between lies literary history. But we shall not need some third thing to provide a compromise theory that moves between the extremes. The neo-classical theory does that, as the romantic theory does not: it provides for, it demands mediation.

A mediation does not work that stays too safely close to its general principles and applies them so flexibly, with such determined academic caution, that it converts them to the eclectic and uncommitted, which is to say the trivial. A mediation that poisons judgment is self-destructive. It cannot work at all.<sup>12</sup> Yet when principles tangle with history, they descend into imperfection. That is why mediation is necessary.

I have mentioned some of the limited forms the long mediation took: Rymer’s theory of type characters, Boileau’s petty prescriptions for the genres; the French pressure for the lesser rules (such as the unities of time and place, and liaison of scenes); the substitution of the elegantly correct for the genuinely proper (a linguistic and intellectual confusion with which we are still plagued, mostly nowadays by those who attack propriety). The last actually frustrates the ideal of propriety to genre, for “proper” language comes to mean language that is somehow *intrinsically* correct, rather than language proper to subject, genre, occasion, intent, morality.

Another notion that both supported and hindered good work in the various kinds is the idea of the three levels of style (high, middle, plain). Some such notion is essential to

any theory at all.<sup>13</sup> For if there is no communicable scale of dignity, of degrees of praise and blame, satire is impossible, mock-epic is impossible, the love lyric is impossible, in fact human communication is impossible. Style can be more or less dignified; it can fit, exalt, or debase a subject. The levels were intimately associated with social class, so that tragedy and epic, about the upper classes, require a high style; comedy, about the lower classes, requires the low.<sup>14</sup> An idea essential to the *Iliad*, the *Aeneid*, *Antigone*, *Phèdre*, and *The Alchemist* can hardly be accused of wrecking our literature. Yet it is a limited notion; it shows a moral deficiency; it crosses Christian doctrine; rigorously applied, it would expel much of Shakespeare's style and some of his characters (the fool in *King Lear* for one) from the heaven of tragic invention. It led to Dryden's redaction and "purifying" of the best language of Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*. Dryden's translation of the "O when degree is shaken" speech is perspicuous, general, and dignified, but loses all the magnificent and huge propriety that Shakespeare reaches. It would exclude the splendid mixture of comic and tragic style in Dryden's own *Absalom and Achitophel*. It would exclude *Paradise Lost*, which has nothing to do with social hierarchy, whose dignity and scope surpass the social and the national.

*Paradise Lost* achieved its propriety evidently and greatly; it could not have existed had there not been the long elaboration of epic theory; but it did not just humbly bow to the rules of epic theory: it emulated, went beyond. It remade the epic. The history and existence of the form, the sense of decorum, the rules major and minor (stated or felt), the individual genius and emulation—all of these have to converge to make a great poem. Such is the give-and-take of literary history, not neat and not unintelligible.

The genres have historical existence: they are not

Platonic Ideas, nor evolved biological species, nor institutions,<sup>15</sup> though all these analogies have their fitness. Individual examples fulfill, with greater or lesser perfection, the concept (and in so doing show us what the concept itself comes to be); they undergo something like mutation and cross-breeding; they are human, social, continuing inventions. I shall attempt no definition, though I would suggest that purely metrical types should not be properly called genres (the sonnet is an exception to that exception).

I shall insist, with an excitement the rest of the pages of this book shall attempt to justify, that sometimes genres do have their fulfillment. Out of the struggle and confusion, the plain muddle of human invention and continuation, a tradition takes life and sings its completeness. An individual composes a poem, and then we know what a genre may be. The *Iliad*, the *Aeneid*, the national epic; *Paradise Lost*, the neo-classical epic; *Oedipus the King*, the classical tragedy; the *Divine Comedy*, the religious-philosophical epic;<sup>16</sup> *King Lear*, non-classical tragedy; *Comus*, the masque; *The Alchemist*, *Volpone*, *The Misanthrope*, the comedy; *Absalom and Achitophel*, the epic satire; *The Dunciad*, the mock-epic; the *Intimations Ode*, the English great ode; *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the literary ballad—all these poems are *sui generis* if you will; they are all enormously original; but they would not exist had not their forms existed historically and had not their authors had a sense of what was fitting to the genres.

There is much to be learned from such poems. Muddle, defect, lesser successes, also may teach us what is good to know. Most of the rest of this book will consist of studies of poems, poems judged by neo-classical rules, that is, primarily, poems judged by the standard that a good poem is a proper image of nature, emulatively heedful of genre.



# 4

## *Lycidas: A Proper Poem*

**L**YCIDAS is the best shorter poem in the language. I shall argue in this chapter that it is great because it fits neo-classical (that is, correct) standards, concentrating on its extraordinary propriety; a propriety to subject, intent, genre, theme; propriety of sound, image, syntax, structure. It obeys the rules.

The reason scholars feel sure of its greatness is that it has pleased many and pleased long. That is, they apply a neo-classical standard.

But—if such a standard be correct—what pleases many and pleases long must be just, universal, probable, seemly. *Lycidas* is. Milton knew it. He makes perfectly plain how conscious the art is, how self-conscious he is that he observes propriety. The performance refutes, flatly and permanently, the queer notion that self-conscious craftsmanship and profoundly expressed passion cannot go together. The poem refers time and again, according to an accepted convention in pastoral, to the proper making of the poem.

The first lines, before the swain starts the song, are prelude and invocation. They are keyed to propriety. The

poet knows precisely what he is doing. Certain little words are tremendously important: "for" in verse 8, "then" in verse 15, "so" in verse 19, "for" in verse 24. These words make clear the intent: to do what is fitting. The central word of the poem is "meed." *Because* ("For") Lycidas is dead before his prime, the swain must disturb the myrtles and ivy before their prime. Lycidas knew to sing: *therefore* ("then") the swain invokes the Muse to aid him in making a just lament. Even so may someone grace his urn with a fitting song: this would be fitting because he, the swain, offers a melodious tear for the dead Lycidas and because the two shepherds were nursed together. They both deserve their "meed," the reward of adequate lament and praise. The linked, laced proprieties hold the first part together: it has the firmness of argument. The performance is passionately felt to be eminently rational; the imagination is everywhere submitted to judgment. What does judgment say? "Lament; overwhelm your audience with powerful and just feeling." Milton does.

He does so within the propriety of the pastoral elegy. That propriety is large and in a way almost contradictory. The political or religious digression was a standard feature: hence it was proper to the genre. Yet it was digression, a movement away from the pastoral mode, away from the response to the language and feeling of "simple" shepherds. Not that *that* mode itself was always idyllic: it included lament for unrequited love, for death, for storms as well as delight in green and lovely nature. The use of digression, then, is both fitting and unfitting to the mode. More directly didactic, more obviously serious in language, feeling and subject, the digressions are in a higher mode ("higher mood," Milton says); yet the digression *is* a standard convention of the form. Milton (as we shall see a bit later) makes his digressions structural—thus proper in every sense.

Another qualification, rather complication, matters. The "digressions" are higher; the pastoral, as such, lower. But the propriety in the lower mode is not governed merely by what the imagined world is; to the degree that the pastoral world stands for reality rather than simply existing as a pleasant invention, the kind of attitude that is proper to that world will change. Hence the legitimate complexity and depth of feeling, diction, and syntax, even in the "lower mood." To make an imitation that is proper to genre and subject, is the rule. Fulfilling the rule is enormously difficult, since the genre is a complex historical thing,<sup>1</sup> since a good poet emulatively remakes the genre in his poem, since the subject is partly visible and partly hidden.

The structure of the poem is plain and well known.<sup>2</sup> I would nevertheless like to review it, with an eye mainly to the conscious propriety of transition.

First (vv. 1-24) comes the prelude and invocation, whose propriety I have discussed. Then there is the bewilderingly beautiful pastoral remembrance (vv. 25-36) of the youth and shared world of the two friends. Then (vv. 37-49) comes the turn from memory to lament. The propriety of the shift is strong: the outburst of a different feeling obtrudes on the memory, as death has obtruded on the life. In both sections, there is sadness and consolation. In the lament the swain-poet keeps the memories; in remembering he knows why he has to remember; but the "heavy change" is none the less great. Then the poem shifts to blame of the nymphs (vv. 50-55), to the realization that neither the nymphs nor the Muse could have availed (vv. 56-64), then to the complex passage on Fame (vv. 65-84). Here, as elsewhere, the transition is more logical than associative although the associative links are many and strong. But the logic is the bone and sinew of the transition. Nothing avails against unripe, unwarning death: *therefore* labor is no use. Phoebus's answer is a divine

and rational reply to that argument (to it we shall return) and ends the first large section of the song. The moral movement has been, so far, memory, lament, doubt, resolution.

The next section, like the first, is introduced with a statement of conscious propriety. "The strain I heard was of a higher mood: But now my Oat proceeds . . ."<sup>3</sup> What proceeds is several mourners who bring lament, explanation, and blame. The last mourner is St. Peter and in his denunciation of the false clergy there is lament, explanation, blame, and (as Tuve shows<sup>4</sup>) consolation. The consolation (at least in part) is the same as that which ended the first section: God will judge. (Has anyone said, among all the guesses about the "two-handed engine," that there is a certain propriety in no man's knowing the exact nature of the instrument of God's mighty, final justice?) The propriety of St. Peter's speech is enormous: the passage is a climax for the procession of mourners; it ends a section with a rational resolution; it transforms traditional and classical pastoral imagery with Biblical pastoral imagery (the mixture itself being a convention of the genre and therefore proper); the didactic digression is itself a convention of the genre; the passage provides a parallel to the consolation of the first section and provides a necessary and dreadful balance to it: it is not good for man to find too easy consolation in the idea of the judgment of God, since man must face that judgment. The passage reintroduces the "higher mood" that is to finish each section of the poem. In short, the passage is not really a digression. It is essential to the substance of the poem.

For the third time, Milton begins a section with a conscious reminder of propriety. "Return Alpheus, Return Sicilian Muse." We return to the lower, lovely pastoral mode. The order of the last section parallels (generally) that of the first: pastoral loveliness complicated with mourn-

ing (vv. 135-152) consciously justified as proper by the verses "For so to interpose a little ease, /Let our frail thoughts dally with false surmise" (vv. 153-154, whose logical function is the same as that of vv. 23-24); then a sharp, exclamatory, logical turn to lament (logical because it explains why the "ease" has been "false"); then—by a more instantaneous reversal than in the first section—consolation and resolution. The consolation here is offered by the poet himself, the first two by Phoebus and St. Peter respectively. The conclusion speaks with the full authority earned by the poem.

Last comes the poet's farewell, which, like the first 24 lines, is not part of the swain's song. Here once again the poet speaks of the varied, deliberate propriety of his poem; he has touched, he says, "the tender stops of various quills."

The fundamental parallelism of the three sections is striking: all lead from some mixture of love, despair, loveliness, doubt; all lead to resolution, which is every time the same resolution—God will judge.

A good bit has been said by critics about the emotional rhythm of the poem. It is there, all right, and magnificently there; the rhythm everywhere corresponds to idea. Sometimes, particularly in the "Return Alpheus" section, Milton's feeling for the emotional rhythm probably governed the placing of the ideas; elsewhere and more frequently the meaning governs the emotion. But the emotion is always *at* something; it is connected, not disconnected. The despair occurs *because* the poet feels that labor is in vain in a meaningless world; the grief comes *because* Lycidas is dead; the delight in loveliness is a response, simple and beautiful enough, to lovely objects; the consolation is possible because God is just and good. The emotion is rationally motivated throughout, in no poem more so: that is, it is proper at each stage to what the poem sees and means.

To be sure, it sees and means a good bit more than we



shall pack into tidy constructs. I have said that propriety depends on subject, but what is the subject? What does the poem see and mean? If I had to choose one word and defend it, I would choose "meed." But, since I do not have to choose one word, I shall say that the poem has several subjects and discuss their relationship.

Two subjects are stated in the headnote: a drowned friend and "our corrupted Clergy." These subjects are handled with propriety: lament is the proper response to bereavement, strong blame the proper feeling to be directed at the corruption.

But the first subject is, at second glance, merely an occasion. Edward King was an acquaintance, not a friend of Milton. Milton did not feel for him the grief he later felt when he wrote the beautiful Latin poem *Damon's Epitaph* for Charles Diodati. The Lycidas of the poem stands for something; he is not merely an invented figure; but he does not stand simply for Edward King.

In the poem, there is no Edward King and no Anglican clergy. There is a shepherd boy who says he will sing a song, who sings a song, and departs. The song is about a shepherd Lycidas, a friend whose recent death the swain laments; the song takes various proper attitudes toward Lycidas: lament at his death, joy at his acceptance in Heaven. We are *told* that the swain stands in some sense for Milton, for the headnote says "The Author bewails. . . ." This adds a third subject to Edward King and the Anglican clergy.

The subjects outside the song, so far, seem to be the real subjects; the subjects inside the song stand for them distinctly and neatly: the swain for Milton, Lycidas for King, the false shepherds for the Anglican clergy. These are all real subjects; but they are not the only subjects, and the relations are not simple.

The swain both is and is not Milton. The shepherd lad

is in the poem: he is as much an invention, a fiction, as the "gadding vine" or the "wizard stream." But part of the convention itself is that the swain stands for the poet, and we have seen that Milton says the swain stands for the poet. With the plague in Horton, and a sea voyage (dangerous, like all voyages in that time) in his near future, Milton might well enough think on the possibility of an early death. The concern for fame, public and heavenly, is personal; so is the expression of the pain of chastity. The concern for poetic fame and the mixture of doubt of and pride in his poetic abilities is not only natural for a young poet, but fits what Milton says in his letters of the period (though clearly enough the happy pride is more real than the dubious humility). Milton is a subject, and an important one. There is no reasonable doubt of that. But to claim Milton as the only real subject is worse than to deny him any place at all. Waiving the grotesqueness of the egoism implied and the queer circularity of the relations of poet to poem, there is simply too much else the poem deals with, and too much else the poem means.

The relation of Milton to swain is nicely caught in the pronouns. The prelude to the song is in the first person, the postlude in the third. The "I" is the shepherd lad as much as the "he," but the shift is none the less happy. It expresses changing degrees of identity, dramatic deepening and "closing in" contrasting with calmer, more distant survey. We do not have to suspend disbelief. We know what is convention, what truth, even though we find that the convention expresses truth in more and deeper ways than we can explain.

King is more important than Milton in the poem. That sounds downright cranky (and so is pleasant to say), but is in real senses true. He is more important because he is central: the poem focuses on him. In focusing, it exalts

him, universalizes and idealizes him, so that he *becomes* a serious figure that the proper emotions really adhere to. Of course one can say that these things are done to Lycidas, not King, and be in a sense right. But only in a sense right. For the shepherd Lycidas stands for a man, a real man, dead, noble, talented, pious, not merely for ideal concepts and principles. This man, whom one might call "King idealized," is very nearly the real subject. At least the meditation about him leads to the real subjects.

The question of propriety is not difficult here. The emotions and attitudes do fit the idealized King. Nor can one seriously object to the idealization. King was apparently a decent, intelligent person whom Milton liked. One should be shocked at the idealization of a notoriously bad person; one should object to flattery for personal gain; but neither applies here. Then, Lycidas does stand for the idealized King, not the actual one. Milton's sincerity was great: he cared for piety, for poetic excellence; he was much perturbed at the fact of death cutting down, without reason and beyond reprieve, the talented young. Since King's death is the occasion for the brooding, even the grief becomes real.

The meditation on King, Lycidas, produces some argumentative conclusions. I have already shown that logical argument is the primary means of transition in the poem. Let us look now at what the arguments say, which should lead us to the most central subjects.

The passage on Fame is constructed in the form of an argument, a debate. The poet-swain carries on a debate with himself that leads to despair; Phoebus refutes him.

The swain's friend has died. He sought to blame the nymphs, for they were carelessly absent. Then he decides that they cannot be blamed, since they are helpless against death. So is the Muse, so even was Orpheus. Then he bursts into the famous outcry "Alas! what boots it. . . ." *Within*



the pastoral frame Milton has deepened the poem to one of the most sombre and fiercely general views of human life ever offered in a poem. The poetic movement is superb; the movement rests on argument.

The deep is "remorseless." It is literally, since the sea is unconscious: it lacks all feeling, hence it lacks remorse. It is figuratively, since the word "remorseless" suggests a deliberately cruel contempt for moral law. The sea is personified as inimical to man, as demonic. It, with death, is contrasted to the nymphs, the bards, the Muse, Orpheus—which is to say, not only man's poetic endeavors, but all his endeavors, including the gods he has invented. What is he up against? Death and brute nature, the "remorseless deep," the "swift Hebrus," and (later) the "whelming tide," the "monstrous [underwater] world." This sounds very twentieth century, and I have the considerable authority of Rosemond Tuve<sup>5</sup> against me, but I do not think the reading is anachronistic. The poem offers us a deep harmony between man and nature, but it offers it as threatened, broken, and later restored. After all, this sort of fear is as old as human nature; witness the Psalms, Job.

The argumentative connection here is double: man's labor is of no avail, because he is up against brute power that disregards him and shall overwhelm him. Therefore his work will come, physically, to nothing. But the second connection is even more important: man is not only up against a greater power than he, he is up against a world that lacks meaning (in the fullest sense of that good, much-bandied-about word); it is a world that lacks justice; it kills without the slightest regard for a man's desert. In such a world, moral principles themselves are delusions; it is certainly absurd to labor sacrificially for ideals that are (like everything else) worthless. In the meantime, what? Well, some women are good-looking.

Were it not better as others use,  
To sport with Amaryllis in the shade,  
Or with the tangles of Neaera's hair?

The "better" is not a moral "better" (except insofar as meanings that deny moral principles tend to keep a flavor of the moral meaning). It means more pleasant for the individual. The poet offers a naturalistic solution (to use a deliberately anachronistic but accurate word) to the problem, and the attempt has exactly the same success as all attempts to supply value in a meaningless world: none whatever. The good man can live for fame, for the pleasure of the world's approval. But that will not do. The man may be stupidly cut off before he blazes out into his full power and recognition. The reality is not Fame; it is the blind Fury with the abhorred shears.

Phoebus, the god of poetic inspiration, here clearly Christianized, answers with divine wisdom. He destroys the conclusion of the earlier argument by denying one of its premises. Death is not final, not master; a brute universe is not the ultimate reality. God is; and to call Him unjust is to decide on grotesquely inadequate evidence. God will judge; finally, and for all. His judgments are just. The key words in the passage are "lastly" and "meed."

The passage is one of the most personally sincere and poetically mighty moments in all literature. What bonds it is argument, to which the feeling is powerfully appropriate, the feeling of perfectly rational despair and perfectly rational joy.

Of course one cannot really call the motivation perfectly rational unless the argument is sound and the conclusion true. I think they are. The problem of belief will be discussed at somewhat greater length later,<sup>6</sup> but a word needs saying here. A person who does not believe in divine justice

cannot really be as moved by the central themes in *Lycidas* as can a person who does believe. Such a person can, of course, be greatly moved by much in the poem and deeply moved by its central moments. But *Lycidas* gives us a crucial instance of belief in poetry. The tolerant and humane naturalist can be moved by the central doctrine only as a great and noble imaginative structure which is, after all is said and done (the "all" including all talk of archetypes and myths), falsehood. And to hold that is to deny, precisely, the central point of the poem: that divine justice is not an illusion.

But a poem that is mistaken in its central and seriously intended meaning, a meaning that gives substance to and makes possible the assuagement, is surely flawed. It is fundamentally improper, for it says boldly, "Offer your most serious feelings and actions to falsehood." One can decide whether a poem is really proper only by deciding that what it says, in its deepest and most central meanings, is true. A good deal of criticism, that casts out the idea of propriety openly only to use it covertly, attempts to escape that problem. But the problem cannot be escaped.

One could escape the problem, in some degree for this one poem, by arguing that Milton and the poem do not really intend the central ideas about "meed." But such a claim would put a large burden of scampering on the nimble disclaimer. The idea of "meed" appears in full triumphant voice at each of the three parallel peaks of the poem; it also squares perfectly with what Milton says in his letters and his prose. And Milton, at the close of the introductory section, calls the poem itself a "meed." The poem *is* what *Lycidas* deserves; it is *about* the reality of desert.

To call "meed" a subject may be improper. To call it a theme, the theme, better fits our normal way of speaking about poems. But (maybe this is but a personal confusion)

subject and theme do not seem to me that separable. Milton is talking about the problem of justice; he says that our fears and doubts can be resolved by the knowledge that God will judge finally and truly. That is what the poem is most importantly about; and is not the subject of any discourse what one is talking about? One may distinguish by saying that subject concerns the people and events a poem tells of, and that theme concerns the moral ideas it tells of or implies. The distinction remains rather arbitrary, and if one makes it, he must still face the fact that subject leads incorrigibly to theme in that sense; they are entangled at every point; and feelings and attitudes must be proper to each.

"Meed" is not all Milton says, even as theme. Let us observe the other two passages of reconciliation.

The St. Peter passage raises a real and crucial question about propriety. I have already argued that it properly fits into the poem, in that it is structural and not a digression. But what of the propriety of the passage with respect to truth?

It must be called improper insofar as it is an untrue piece of "Puritan propaganda against the bishops."<sup>7</sup> The satirist has the right and the duty to smite groups and individuals who behave immorally and a perfect right to be as topical as he pleases. But he is responsible for telling the essential truth (allowing some range for rhetorical heightening). The question of propriety to truth raises both historical and poetic issues. To the degree that the Anglican clergy of the day did not deserve the charge (and no one would deny that the lines betray some party spirit), Milton is wrong and the passage is improper. But the permanent greatness of satire consists in its rising above the topical, in its fitting human corruption in many times and places. The lines do that. We have heard some scranne pipes screech in our own time. And the poetic and vituperative skill of

the lines places Milton among the master satirists of the language, Chaucer, Jonson, Rochester, Dryden, Pope.

The lines have a greater propriety than that. Their primary function in the argument and structure of the poem is to represent human corruption *as a cause of metaphysical and religious doubt*. The Fame passage faces out one major cause of doubt: the brute power and meaninglessness of the physical universe and of death. This passage faces the gigantic fact of human corruption, human history as a history of cruelty, misgovernment, and pain. The answer is authoritative and brief (this passage does not have the form of argument): God knows; He waits; He will strike. The answer consoles; it also terrifies.

The poem could, as argument, stop there. But the poem is more than argument. The argument has been firmly concluded. The answer needs to be given as vision.

The vision could come, logically, at once, but does not.<sup>8</sup> Why? Because it would violate every shred of poetic and moral fiber Milton had.<sup>9</sup> Leave out the flower passage and see. We would move from the thunderous vindication of God's justice by his wrath, without recovery or transition, to a supremely joyous affirmation of heavenly glory. It cannot be done, at least in this poem. The emotional rhythm cries out for a transition.

Then, too, Arethusa, which is to say the lower, lovely pastoral mode, has not yet had her due. The Fame passage and the St. Peter passage are very close together. Twenty lines separate them and these lines are not in the lovelier pastoral vein. Loveliness, tragedy, and a reconciling vision of divine justice, are the three essential modes of the poem. The loveliness remains in much that is sorrowful in the poem, and it breathes a consolation as natural as flowers. The poem needs a full share of such consolation, and has not, at the end of the St. Peter passage, had its share. Milton



is free to turn to it, since the invocation of Alpheus is justified by the parallel invocation of Arethusa. The invocation of Alpheus is a very happy touch. It mingles loving waters; the myth of the unity of the river and the fountain suggests the harmonious and natural unity that the lower, consoling mode is meant to express. Also, Milton needs to return to the lower mode, but to invoke Arethusa again would be to call attention to a slight flaw of construction. The interlude between the peaks of Fame and St. Peter is a bit too short; it builds too quickly to the St. Peter passage. By invoking Alpheus, Milton leads us back to Arethusa without calling her name. As that mood can consist with the tragic, it can also meet the higher reconciliation by quiet foreshadowing. In the line "Bid Amaranthus all her beauty shed," the three moods of loveliness, tragedy, and divine consolation meet, in strange paradox (since it says to bid the unfading flower to fade), yet in extraordinary beauty.

The interposition of a "little ease" has another use. It makes possible the power of the imagery that concerns the "monstrous world." Put side by side with the terrible image of God's wrath, the whelming tide and the monstrous world would be greatly diminished in power. Put next to the flowerets, they gain in tragic strength. The beauty of nature is contrasted with its inhuman power. The inhuman power is needed (once again) for contrast with the reconciliation that is to follow.

Thus the passage makes possible a repetition in little of the emotional shape of the poem: loveliness, tragic destruction, reconciliation. The flowers, the whelming tide, the final vision which completes the poem.

The final passage makes vision what was argument, which gives it a poetic reason for being. Its theology has its reasons too. The first two climaxes insisted on God's justice, the second of the two insisting on the stark and terrible

power of that justice. Here, at the poem's end, mercy and justice dwell together. The "might" is "dear," as is the poetic might that expresses it, uniting, once more in accepted pastoral and Christian invention, classical and Christian motifs into a final vision. Justice has been done, to Lycidas, through the poem.

The lesser subjects lead to universal ones. Partly this works by simple exemplification. The swain mourning for Lycidas is an example of grief felt by every man; the poetic labors which the poet seeks a justification for in the passage on Fame, exemplify every man's activity, every man's wish for justification. But exemplification is not the only means. The larger and deeper subjects and themes are also created by direct argument, by connotation, by structural emphasis and suggestion and repetition. Another and special link exists. We are told that the shepherd's song is Lycidas' "meed." As such, that song is an example of Milton's attempts to write proper (i.e., just) poems. The poem, an objectification of Milton's hopes and fears, presents the general theme of "meed," of the reality of values and of reward. God underwrites value and metes out judgment. The poem itself—both the shepherd's song and the whole poem—is but one example of its largest theme; hence the poem is hugely impersonal. The poem is a triumphant argument that genuine propriety, including its own, is possible.

The subject, then, is finally (I quite agree with David Daiches)<sup>10</sup> nothing less than man's activity on earth. The poem says and means: "Man's labor is not in vain, because God is just and merciful, though it is only through a genuine facing of tragedy that man can appreciate that justice and mercy." One can speak, as some have,<sup>11</sup> of the poem as Milton's achieving of emotional reconciliation. Surely it is. In it Milton quieted real and personal fears. But it is that, and here once more propriety appears, because it gives a



ground for emotional reconciliation. The postlude is gay, not only because Milton has worked out, by some magic of poetic catharsis, his emotional problems, but because he has a reason to be gay. The real emotional problem in the poem is bound up with a question, "Is there a just God? Does life make sense?" or in our modern jargon, "Are values really significant?" They are all one question, as Milton had the wisdom to see. And the poem solves that emotional problem in the only way it can be solved: it answers, Yes.

The major proprieties are kept: propriety to genre, propriety of transition and structure and digression, complex propriety of feeling to complex subject (including theme). The lesser proprieties (they are no less essential to poetic success!) are kept too, proprieties of language and metrics among others. Without them, the major proprieties would be impossible. Feeling cannot be proper which does not exist, which the poem does not express, and such feelings are expressed, line through line, by poetic technique, by the meeting of technique and meaning. *Lycidas*, more than most poems, tempts one to dwell on particular and minute beauties. I shall pass over many. What I shall do is to show some typical and some special techniques, especially some concerned with metrics and syntax, and try to show how and why they are proper.

The general propriety of quality of sound and language is not apt to be debated. The exquisite loveliness of the lovely passages, the harshness of the strong ones, is very apparent. In fact, if *Lycidas* has a fault of quality, it is that it tends to be too overtly imitative in the harsher sections. Something like *tour de force* appears in such phrases as "forc'd fingers rude" in metrical context. But it is the sort of error that tempts a master, that expresses the sense of fresh and mounting power the young author of the poem felt. He knew that the phrase was a courteous fiction.

The metrical pattern is simple: iambic pentameter, irregularly rhymed, with occasional short lines (always iambic trimeters).<sup>12</sup> It combines, like all forms that permit the great emotions, large freedom and large control. The irregular rhyming (emulated from the Italian canzone) is a useful freedom, also a limit. I doubt that it could be sustained in a much longer poem, and it is perhaps better for lovely, astonishing effects or for passages that build up swiftly toward their climaxes, rather than for the widest variety of effects possible in blank verse (or the slightly less wide, but still huge, variety which is possible in the heroic couplet).

The most useful and essential freedom for a poem of any length is freedom of verse paragraphing,<sup>13</sup> a freedom that extends not only to the punctuated paragraphs of *Lycidas* but to the lesser groupings within them. Here, more than in any other feature of technique, one feels that Milton *builds* his poem. The surging, controlled, growing, turning energy comes to powerful form several times, on each occasion fitting closely the intent and subject. Take the second part of the first paragraph.

Bitter constraint, and sad occasion dear,  
Compels me to disturb your season due  
For Lycidas is dead, dead ere his prime,  
Young Lycidas, and hath not left his peer.  
Who would not sing for Lycidas? He knew  
Himself to sing and build the lofty rhyme.  
He must not float upon his wat'ry bier  
Unwept, and welter to the parching wind,  
Without the meed of some melodious tear.

(vv. 6-14)

The first two lines are extremely formal and dignified. Five almost equally prominent accents link the two causes of the poem; and the "dear," because it follows its noun,

because of its prominent place in the line, and because of its meaning, gets very special emphasis. The line begins and ends with an accent on a telling adjective. The next verse ends with another displaced epithet, and a very important one, which means "proper." The displaced epithet is a powerful instrument in the poem. Its chief function is to make the syntax poetic, to call our attention clearly and formally to the fact that poetic syntax is refined from the language of normal prose and speech, and is a different thing. Conscious and visible formality is a solid part of Milton's convention, and such epithets are proper to it. He uses them in a masterly way, giving prominence, stiffening or balancing phrasing throughout the poem.

The next lines offer a change of feeling and form. The heavy reiteration of "dead" moves away from the dignified formality to sprung rhythm representing grief. The fact that a man struck by grief tends to repeat his words partly justifies the repetition of *Lycidas*. So does pastoral convention. The placing of the third *Lycidas* deep in line nine makes a graceful and firm sound effect. The links of the sentence, as we saw earlier, are logical as well as emotional. The "Who would not sing . . ." begins an idea that, through several shifts of stress on the pronoun that stands for *Lycidas*, ends in the "melodious tear," which is to be shed by the person who in fact does sing. The sense of strong twisting variety closes in the sense of return, fulfilling an unpredictable but solid frame. The contrast in tone, in total quality, of sound, movement, diction between lines thirteen and fourteen is pronounced and adumbrates the relationship between the wildness of tragedy and the formality of grief that the poem is to focus.

The syntax of that passage is relatively simple, if extended. Syntax becomes elsewhere the foundation of the poetic effect. One example shall serve.

Ay me! Whilst thee the shores and sounding Seas  
Wash far away, where'er thy bones are hurl'd,  
Whether beyond the stormy Hebrides  
Where thou perhaps under the whelming tide  
Visit'st the bottom of the monstrous world;  
Or whether thou to our moist vows denied,  
Sleep'st by the fable of Bellerus old  
Where the great vision of the guarded Mount  
Looks towards Namancos and Bayona's hold;  
Look homeward Angel now, and melt with ruth:  
And O ye Dolphins, waft the hapless youth.

(vv. 154-64)

The passage builds to a climax of epic sweep, then drops into the pathos of lament, whose sweetness and futility are suggested in the very lightness of sound and accent. Here is the great other vision, of honest and brave despair, the best vision man can reach if in fact his weeping prayers ("moist vows") are finally denied.

The syntax is, through line 162, a sentence fragment (which might be called a clause fragment since it is punctuated as the first part of a compound sentence divided by a semicolon). After "Ay me!" the clause is a subordinate adverbial clause modifying "dally" in verse 153 ("Let our frail thoughts dally with false surmise"). The compound subject is "shores" and "seas," the verb "wash," the object "thee," in a beautiful order, more firmly knit than prose and quite impossible in prose. Then proceeds some fantastic and splendid subordination to that subordination. The clause "where'er thy bones are hurl'd" is subordinate to "wash far away"; then two correlative clauses introduced by "whether . . . or whether," modify "are hurl'd."<sup>14</sup> Each of these clauses contains a prepositional phrase, the noun of which is modified by a "where" clause. Then, after the semicolon at the end of verse 162, are three complete imperative clauses—an ejaculation not parallel to anything.

Looked at as prose syntax, the sentence is very bad. It contains a sentence (clause) fragment; it is guilty of gross oversubordination; three independent clauses are by the punctuation paralleled to one dependent clause that refers to nothing. The first of the independent clauses depends on an implicit reference most readers will need a footnote for (the Angel is St. Michael, the "Mount" meaning St. Michael's Mount); the order of subject-verb-object is garbled time and again.

But it is not prose syntax; and all of these features (except the implicit reference) are distinct virtues. The recreated order makes poetic strength. The non-parallel interjection comes with exact emotional propriety. The subordination allows the great and multiple geographical ranging, allows epic vision kept in precise control and relevance to the immediate subject (the dead body of Lycidas)—all in a very few lines. The normal "rule" of subordination (not always sound even in prose) goes out the window: that the independent clause be more important and prominent than any subordinate clause. The long subordinate clause is one of the greatest of all literary visions of the magnificence and the fearful mystery, greatness, and power of the physical universe. It keeps company with *King Lear* and *Moby Dick*. The independent clauses express a lovely pathos. What would be improper in prose is most proper in this poetry.

Bonamy Dobrée's remark that Milton's poetic style did a disservice to our language is very curious. Without Milton's poetic style we would not have Collin's *Ode to Evening* (and, lacking that poem, some of Blake's loveliest lyrics would not be); Dryden's *Anne Killigrew* or *Absalom and Achitophel*; or Wordsworth's *Prelude*. For that matter, lacking Milton's poetic style, we would not have *Lycidas* or *Paradise Lost*. The question is one of propriety. Milton's poetic style would not do for prose; the style of *Lycidas*,



from which by modulation, development, and strengthening comes the style of *Paradise Lost*, is not fit for every poem. But it is fit for *Lycidas*. Exactly as such it is one of the greatest services our language has received.

Much else could be said, of the thousand minute proprieties of technique to vision, of the much studied and often abused imagery, of the fullness of Milton's acceptance and remodeling of the accepted form and its several conventions.<sup>15</sup>

*Lycidas*, I have argued, is a proper poem that instructs and delights. The delight is multiple and proper. Part of the delight is the delight in the making. Harsh things have been said about John Crowe Ransom's essay on *Lycidas*.<sup>16</sup> Whatever its faults, he sees with the eye of a poet a delight that is there (even if Ransom makes it sound almost frivolous): the delight of a poet finding his stride, burgeoning with new power. Delight in good skill appears everywhere in good poetry, proper to the poem's achievement, separate from, co-existing with the varied feelings proper to the subject. Nowhere in poetry is it present with more freshness or a clearer purity than in *Lycidas*.

He touch't the tender stops of various Quills,  
With eager thought warbling his Doric lay.

The "various Quills" show a clear sense of propriety, a delight in fitness; the "thought" has been real thought on the most serious subjects; the gaiety is a gaiety earned by a mighty struggle, justified by the poem's argument. Yet, too, it is a simple gaiety in the pleasure of singing, and of hoping. The "fresh woods and the pastures new" of the closing verse are a conventional leave-taking; they may or may not refer to Milton's planned Italian journey; mostly they express the eager thought of a poet looking forward with an ambition that for once the future was to justify.



# 5

## *Three Odes*

**L**YCIDAS is a proper poem. It is great because it obeys the rules. It delights and instructs, it emulates, it is true to reality. Its techniques fit its intent. *Therefore* the rules are consonant with passionate sincerity, with deep and unique unity, and with the full mystery of poetic power.

To have seen so much is to see something that matters. Still, my discussion of *Lycidas* may, as an argument for the validity of neo-classical concepts, smack of the circular. For *Lycidas* was intended as a work in a special genre; its propriety is overtly and plainly conscious. Milton was innocent of any notion of "rules" of his "own origination." What of other poems? If the neo-classical theory is true, it should be able to deal with many sorts of poems, those intended to fit its principles, those that depart from them, those that partly fit and partly cross its rules. The rest of this book will be concerned with several poems which I consider, for various reasons, highly relevant to my defense of propriety.

In this chapter I shall discuss three odes, in three different periods, with a special interest in seeing what happens to a great genre, and to some basic notions of genre, in the

nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The three odes are Dryden's *To the Pious Memory of Anne Killigrew*, Wordsworth's *Intimations Ode*, and Allen Tate's *Ode to the Confederate Dead*. The basic argument of this chapter will parallel that of the last: the three poems are good, because they fit the rules—they instruct and delight; they are emulative; they are sound imitations of important reality; they display propriety to genre, to subject, and intent. Wordsworth's is the greatest of the three.

What is an ode? The historical definition is even less precise than that of the pastoral elegy. Roughly the high ode can be considered (as it developed in England) to be a poem of address, on a subject of public importance, attempting the sublime and magnificent. The three odes are of single kind, a kind that has had varying names: the English Pindaric ode, the greater lyric, the great ode, the pseudo-Pindaric ode, the irregular ode, the Cowleyan ode.<sup>1</sup> The kind is neither monostrophic (with a repeated stanzaic form, like Keats' odes), nor polystrophic (like some of Pindar's or Jonson's *To . . . Sir Lucius Cary and Sir H. Morison*), with an orderly patterning of different fixed stanzaic forms. They are "free." They are not, however, in free verse: they are all three in iambic meter with lines and sections of varying lengths (Tate's poem employs the iambic with considerable freedom, allowing many variations, especially anapestic substitutions, but the base is still iambic). The form is fundamentally and in a strict sense "expressionistic," that is "formally dependent upon the mood, emotion, or idea expressed."<sup>2</sup> To modulate the form to fit the great ideas and emotions the kind seeks, yet keep a sense of harmony and unity—that is the high intent. Very few poems achieve it. The freedom within the form offers difficulty as well as opportunity.

Compared to shorter lyrics, the great ode offers a large

freedom. But the form could probably never be used successfully for a longer poem; at least it never has. It lacks the blend of freedom and control (particularly a firm base against which subtle variations can be felt) common to both free verse and the heroic couplet. It would not do for a great *story*, offering no steadiness of forward motion: it builds climaxes too fast for the demands of continued narrative. And pure free verse, lacking the relative stability of the iambics of the great ode, can seldom or never, in a poem of comparable length, achieve as much variety.<sup>3</sup>

The chief temptation of the form is metrical and emotional and intellectual chaos, pure formlessness masquerading as form, and no poem in this kind ever escapes at least one or two moments of dissolution. A counter-temptation is also real: the kind tends to depend on too simple modes of formation, primarily contrast and balance. "Reconciling" or presenting opposites is one of the easiest things for poets (or academicians) to do, and can make for very simple form. (Of course real resolution is something else again). Two of the three poems, Wordsworth's and Tate's, lean heavily on contrast of moods, and the poets go to considerable trouble to elaborate and vary the contrasts enough to make the poems formally sound (and consequently convincing). They succeed; but the temptation is there.

Does this kind illustrate organic form? If it did, it would still be true that the theory of organic form reduces poetry to one kind. But it does not. Organic form would preclude the iambics. One cannot, even with fairly strong poetic habits, write iambics throughout a poem without consciously and extrinsically willing iambics, that is, without imposing a pattern of a sort from "without" on the free growth. Iambics do not grow. They are willed. These poems are to be judged as any other: on grounds of propriety, not by some intuition of mysterious inwardness. These three poems all

have movements of mysterious beauty; but at the risk of convicting myself of bone-hardheadedness I would insist that that is one of the proprieties of the kind: they are supposed to express sublimity and magnificence, and the sublime and magnificent is always mysterious. Nor is that the only propriety and beauty they possess. Their beauty, their propriety, and their truth are in some part discussable.

The form was almost universally held to be the greatest lyric form for over a century, during the late seventeenth and through most of the eighteenth century. The requirements are few and flexible, even in particularized theory. Such a poem should be on a great subject; it should modulate its techniques to express the fit attitudes to its subject; it should be personally sincerely and profoundly felt; it should achieve magnificence. Of course, too, it must obey the rules for all poetry: it must be delightful, instructive, probable, passionate, lively, just.

Dryden's poem is the most Christian, social, and impersonal of the three. It has its startling and haunting beauties; it is a masterpiece of a great master. Adverse modern criticism reflects but on the critics and our age.

The full title is important, if bulky. *To the Pious Memory of the Accomplish'd Young Lady, Mrs. Anne Killigrew, Excellent in the Two Sister-Arts of Poesy and Painting, An Ode.* It is an ode, an irregular ode. It is to her memory: that is, it is a poem of praise, more panegyric than lament. It praises her for being "pious," "accomplish'd," "young," and a "lady." That is to say, the poem concerns religion, the arts, youth, and (joining two meanings of lady) moral and social hierarchy.

The poem is passionately sincere. The subject is Anne Killigrew exalted, and the question is not whether the actual lady was as good as Dryden paints her, but whether the ideals are sound ones in which the poet believes. They are.

Dryden did. In fact some of the emotional freshness of the poem springs from his recent conversion to Catholicism.<sup>4</sup> The ideals of sanctity, of the lofty mission of the arts, of deep familial love are permanent ones because they are true. The ideal of the accomplished lady is a lesser one, fitting for a certain society (and an ideal that can degenerate into something ugly, unchristian, and neurotic), but Dryden shows it at its best.

The religion is happy. Dryden had his spiritual struggles, as some magnificent lines of *Religio Laici*, *The Hind and the Panther*, and his translation of *Veni, Creator Spiritus* prove. He had looked into shadows. But here he expresses not the agonies, but the joy of religion. Such joy is proper, more proper to his subject than would be the anxiety of a Donne or a Kafka. The poem speaks directly and finds the speaking good.

The first section has been well known, since Samuel Johnson's praise, for its rush of sound and sustained syntax and diction. It is addressed to the lady.

# I

Thou youngest virgin-daughter of the skies,  
 Made in the last promotion of the blest;  
 Whose palms, new pluck'd from paradise.  
 In spreading branches more sublimely rise,  
 Rich with immortal green above the rest:  
 Whether, adopted to some neighboring star,  
 Thou roll'st above us, in thy wand'ring race,  
     Or, in procession fix'd and regular,  
     Mov'd with the heavens' majestic pace;  
     Or, call'd to more superior bliss,  
 Thou tread'st, with seraphims, the vast abyss:  
     Whatever happy region is thy place,  
     Cease thy celestial song a little space;  
 (Thou wilt have time enough for hymns divine,  
     Since heav'n's eternal year is thine.)

---

THREE ODES

---

Hear then a mortal Muse thy praise rehearse,  
In no ignoble verse;  
But such as thy own voice did practice here,  
When thy first fruits of poesy were giv'n,  
To make thyself a welcome inmate there;  
While yet a young probationer,  
And candidate of heav'n.

Milton himself built few passages loftier than this; Milton is emulated: the strong and just pride of "no ignoble verse" echoes the beginning of *Paradise Lost*; the "whether . . . or" clauses, which create range and authority, resemble strikingly and may reflect the passage of *Lycidas* that begins "where'er thy bones are hurl'd"; and he learned from Milton the heavenly daring of the address. Like Milton, he loves science and baptizes it. The meteor's irregular motion becomes a Christian symbol; the regularity of the stars suggests the fundamental rationality in the physical universe; the seraphims transcend the physical universe and show us, even in using it analogically, its lesser place.

The syntax is simple, its articulation splendid. "Wherever you may be in heaven, cease your song for a moment, and listen to this poem." The whole image of the heavens occurs within subordination in this invocation. The verbs and verbals concentrate the double truth of grace and will. The saint is active, willing, yet passively "mov'd" by "majestic pace." The passage leads back, logically and gracefully, from the saint to the life and the art, suggesting the divine origin and high mission of poetry which is to be a chief theme of the whole poem. Theology justifies the apotheosis. She is not quite made a goddess. She is saved; and salvation credits the full music.

After the relatively weak second and third sections, which celebrate her inheritance aristocratic and poetic, the fourth section is a satiric digression, pungent and penitent



in its attack, based on standards implied by the invocation and made specific here.

O gracious God! how far have we  
Profan'd the heav'nly gift of poesy!  
Made prostitute and profligate the Muse,  
Debas'd to each obscene and impious use,  
Whose harmony was first ordain'd above  
For tongues of angels, and for hymns of love!  
O wretched we! why were we hurried down  
This lubric and adult'rate age,  
(Nay, added fat pollutions of our own,)  
T' increase the steaming ordures of the stage?

The fifth section turns for contrast to her innocent poetry and provides a commonplace topic of praise. Her natural talent was so great that it supplied the place of finishing and emulative artistry. Two verses fall oddly on the modern ear: "Such noble vigor did her verse adorn/ That it seem'd borrow'd, where 't was only born." They make plain what Dryden held to be the real standard of poetic excellence: the maturely emulative art that fulfills the power of native talent.

The sixth and seventh sections turn, naturally enough, to her paintings and trace their propriety through a more or less rising scale of subjects: pastoral nature, beautiful ruins, the portrait of the English King and Queen.

The eighth section is a direct and strongly written if not very affecting lament. The magnificent ninth section turns to her brother, who has yet to hear of his loss.

Meantime her warlike brother on the seas  
His waving streamers to the winds displays,  
And vows for his return, with vain devotion, pays.  
Ah, generous youth, that wish forbear,  
The winds too soon will waft thee here!  
Slack all thy sails, and fear to come.

Alas, thou know'st not, thou art wreck'd at home!  
No more shalt thou behold thy sister's face,  
Thou hast already had her last embrace.  
But look aloft, and if thou kenn'st from far  
Among the Pleiads a new kindled star,  
If any sparkles than the rest more bright,  
'T is she that shines in that propitious light.

Strangely, yet somehow appropriate to the emotional rhythm of the poem, the lower consolation of the classical metamorphosis comes after the higher consolation of the beatification of the first stanza. (Milton does the same in *Lycidas*, when he moves from the Book of Revelations to the "Genius of the Shore.") The Pleiads, virgin sisters who mounted to heaven, display a more unmistakable propriety. The stars, the ascent of the soul, the propitious light connote last things, and Dryden opens the final sections of the poem with a subject which is always one of his favorites—apocalypse.

When in mid-air the golden trump shall sound,  
To raise the nations under ground:  
When in the Valley of Jehosaphat  
The judging God shall close the book of fate,  
And there the last assizes keep  
For those who wake and those who sleep;  
When rattling bones together fly  
From the four corners of the sky;  
When sinews o'er the skeletons are spread,  
Those cloth'd with flesh, and life inspires the dead;  
The sacred poets first shall hear the sound  
And foremost from the tomb shall bound,  
For they are cover'd with the lightest ground;  
And straight, with inborn vigor, on the wing,  
Like mounting larks, to the new morning sing.  
Then thou, sweet saint, before the choir shalt go,  
A harbinger of heaven, the way to show,  
The way which thou so well hast learn'd below.

The section comprises a remarkable contrast. The first part, with its lines of varied lengths, a harsh and grotesque (and Hebraic) vigor in diction and imagery, builds an impacted and terrible climax. The second part becomes more regular, sweetens its diction, releases brilliant, free and buoyant imagery and sound in quiet and soaring joy.

The fundamental order of the poem, more loose than that of *Lycidas*, more controlled than that of most poetry, consists in movement among related topics of praise, beginning and ending in eternity. Seen narrowly yet truly, the poem praises a single life. Seen more broadly and more truly, it speaks of all human civilization and art against a background of the eternity that grounds and judges that life and all life. The propriety, like that of *Lycidas*, rests on theistic foundations. Value is real; therefore fit praise may be fully and richly expressed, and made without apology or ironic reserve. Dryden's delight in conscious mastery appears everywhere; in that too the poem resembles *Lycidas*; the poem also enlivens feelings proper to Dryden's most deep and steadfast convictions (given fresh impetus by his conversion), most of all to his belief in a created, hierarchical and meaningful world in which the order of value is more real than the physical order, and fulfills it.

What happens when men's belief in such a nature cracks? What happens to poetry? To the idea of propriety? To look from Dryden to Wordsworth and Tate is vividly to raise these questions. Suppose sublimity and magnificence are but tricks played by our nervous system on the world? Both Wordsworth and Tate have their moments for fearing so.

Wordsworth's doubts (which are no small part of the subject of his best poetry) were mostly overcome. He avoids Coleridge's intricate and tortuous involvement with the problems raised by such doubts, in part by strength of

character, in part by lack of concern for philosophical consistency. One can speak well of the latter trait by saying he was wise enough to prefer experience to abstract theory, or harshly by saying that he set out to be a philosophical poet while having a fundamental distaste for philosophical reasoning. Both ways, one touches truth. Wordsworth's profound concern for fundamental ideas and feelings, and his steadfast refusal to handle them with anything close to logical rigor, combine to make one of his greatest strengths, a strength that also sets limits.

Yet in many ways he is consistent, serious, and emulative. His fundamental view of poetry is the same as Dryden's. Poetry is an image of man and nature.<sup>5</sup> It should reform feelings to make them "consonant to nature."<sup>6</sup> He believes in the kinds, in propriety to kind, in judgment's supremacy over imagination, in the long labor of art perfecting talent.<sup>7</sup> He believes in the high moral calling of poetry and, like Milton and Dryden, thinks of it as a religious vocation. No other poet ever followed his calling with greater independence, resolution, or devotion. The plain truth is not bardolatry: Wordsworth is a great and heroic figure. He is also one of the rare technical masters, a master of diction, imagery, syntax, and meter.<sup>8</sup>

The great difference that separates Wordsworth from Shakespeare, Milton, Jonson, Dryden is *not* his theory of poetry, but what he believes and feels about nature that art is to imitate and be consonant with. Where earlier masters are apt to see symbolic degree and objective beauty, Wordsworth tends to see concretion and interaction. Two of his favorite subjects, through the 1805-1806 *Prelude*, are the interaction of man and nature, and the providential moral force of physical nature in molding sound human character. Yet, though his subject is interaction, he does not in the Preface of 1802 and elsewhere conceive of a *poem* as an

interaction of man with nature; he sees it rather as a passionate statement *about* man and nature. The making of the poem, he rightly holds, is a deliberative activity after the fact. That belief helps to explain the clarity of statement Wordsworth achieves, even in a poem (such as *Tintern Abbey*) composed close upon the experience and regardless of what lack of clearness that may be in the doctrine he is expressing. He sees himself seeing, and his theory of poetry is more lucid than his theory of nature.

His greatest shorter poem is the *Intimations Ode* (*Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Earliest Childhood*). It seems, at first sight, guilty of two fundamental improprieties to the kind, since the kind is that of a public poem on a major subject, attempting the sublime and magnificent. The ode is private, its quite undisguised subject is the poet himself. On what grounds, then, can one justify the overwhelming magnificence of the style? Is Wordsworth, as the subject, *that* great? He would have been less great had he thought so. Is the real subject then the greatness of the human spirit, as Arthur Beatty maintains?<sup>9</sup> Decidedly not. Rather its tragic impoverishment. It is a poem about loss, about enormous loss, and about tragic acceptance of that loss. It is also (like *Lycidas*) a poem in which a young poet comes to terms with his most painful experiences and fears: one of the major proprieties of tone to subject comes in the expression of the straightforward honesty with which those fears are faced.

The pattern on the poem is a series of changes on Then-Now. The Then, the poet's childhood, was holy, lit by supernatural light; the Now is a time of loss of vision and of lesser vision. The claims of Now are several times presented, each time eclipsed. Because, compared to the former glory the poet has seen, those claims are nothing. Yet, the poet concludes, one should be thankful for what



yet remains, for the inestimable privilege of having once seen the vision, for the occasional privilege of return in memory to the vision, and for—more beautiful and more difficult of formulation—the fact that the vision unconsciously persists and validates what is worthy in our experience. It is a poem of stoic thanksgiving.

One cannot really make it a naturalistic poem. Lionel Trilling attempts the task; he has to remake the poem drastically to make it fit Freudian notions. In the poem occurs one possible flash of agnostic doubt, that one merely possible, the phrase “be they what they may.” For the rest, the poem is plainly and avowedly supernaturalistic. Trilling of course is free to call the supernaturalism an illusion (and build up a moral theory, that for all Trilling’s urbanity, ends up making delusion “the master light of all our seeing”),<sup>10</sup> but it perverts plain language to claim that the supernaturalism is not intended.

This is true, regardless of how seriously Wordsworth intended the doctrine of pre-existence as such.<sup>11</sup> He never liked to commit himself to specific theological positions; that was one way in which he was not stubborn. His later note that soft-pedals the doctrine was occasioned by the fact that some orthodox Christians were perturbed when he expressed it.<sup>12</sup> He proceeds in the same note to give some reasons for making the doctrine at least allowable. He is not especially concerned, in or out of the poem, to maintain that the individual soul pre-existed. He is most powerfully concerned to maintain that the child comes from God, that the vision of supernature granted to innocence is real and holy, and that that vision is tragically lost in mature life.

Yet it is clearly not an orthodox Christian poem. The “fall” (Wordsworth points out the analogy to the Christian doctrine of the Fall in the note mentioned above) is not involved with a sense of sin, original or actual. No redemp-



tion is offered or hoped for; the main point of the poem is that any redemption, any climbing back, is impossible. Christ plays no part. Immortality after death (the "faith that looks through death") is given, strangely, as one of the lesser goods whose consolation is not real compared to the loss of the glory. Wordsworth never had any strong feeling for a life after death, even though he formally accepted the Christian doctrine.<sup>13</sup>

The parallels to Vaughan's *The World* or *The Retreat*,<sup>14</sup> argue the validity of the experience. Vaughan was a genuine mystic.<sup>15</sup> There are degrees of grace and degrees of religious experience. The holiness of innocence partakes of grace, but how many adults have such memories of childhood as this poem offers? Be that as it may, the experience the Ode is about, it seems to me, is different and greater, in kind and degree, than the experience that inspired *Tintern Abbey*, and I am not about to deny some genuine religious experience to that poem (intellectually confused and tending toward idolatry of the Creation, it may be). The view of physical nature taken in the Ode is radically different from that in *Tintern Abbey*. *Tintern Abbey* tends to idolatry; the view in the Ode tends (in this, too, showing a quality of much piety) to a Manichean rejection of nature, towards what Charles Williams would call a "rejection of the images."<sup>16</sup> At least the claims of nature are seen as *relatively* worthless, even though the celestial power was felt as a light on nature. Compared to the majesty of the supernatural vision, nature is nothing. In *Tintern Abbey* (with imperfect consistency), adulthood is the time of deeper religious experience. The Ode reverses that also.<sup>17</sup> The child of the poem sees what no adult can.

The original motto taken from Virgil, "*Paulo majora canamus*,"<sup>18</sup> ("let us make a somewhat greater thing the subject of our song"), expresses Wordsworth's sense of the

literary past, and expresses his emulation of that past. He worked gladly within an established kind, yet supplied it with his own music and a new and greater vision.

The form is simple in essence (changes played on Then-Now), carefully and magnificently unfolded, with a mastery of crescendo and decrescendo, of meter and diction and tone never surpassed, in many ways never equalled, in our poetry. Perhaps there is paradox here. The subject rejects the claims of the world, the poem exhibits and proclaims the greatness of art. If this be paradox, and I am not at all sure it is, it was a paradox deep in and dear to Wordsworth's heart and mind.

The *lack* of address in the opening of the poem surprises, since the form is, as Wordsworth knew, a poem of address. The poet speaks without *persona*, to whoever will listen, almost to himself. To use Northrop Frye's pleasant insight into the lyric (not true of all lyrics), we overhear him.

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,  
The earth, and every common sight,  
    To me did seem  
    Apparelled in celestial light,  
The glory and the freshness of a dream.  
It is not now as it hath been of yore;—  
    Turn wheresoe'er I may,  
    By night or day,  
The things which I have seen I now can see no more.

The diction is general, as it usually is in Wordsworth's best poetry. The sense of huge sweep here—the viewing of all of (the poet's) life, all of nature, all varieties of human experience (implicit in the "turn wheresoe'er I may")—yields credence to the sturdy magnificence of sound and the splendor of the imagery. The syntax is lucid, almost sternly simple (as in the astonishing *twelve* monosyllables of the

last lines, answering to the ten of line 6), yet lit by the glory and tragedy of the meaning. There is almost, not quite, a hitch in the syntax at the central line, "The glory and the freshness of a dream." The nouns "glory" and "freshness" are objects of "in" and paralleled to "light" (the earth is apparelled in glory), yet the concentration and centrality of the line, and the lack of a connecting "and" or repeated "in," give an impression that the syntax breaks off, that Wordsworth stops the advance of meaning and relation in order to focus our eyes on the vision whose relationship to the rest is clear though unstated. He does not break off the syntax literally; but the effect is achieved. Even in the most surging moments of the poem he is master. The mastery is hidden. The emotion towers.

The meter is beyond praise. The shortening and lengthening of the verse do not fit in any neat line-by-line way the relative stress of meaning, but the general sense of closing and opening works into the complex pressures of the Then and Now and the two and mingling moods of ecstasy and lament. The central point in verse paragraphing and phrasing comes after "dream," where the poet turns from the past to the present, from glory to lament. "It is not now . . ." is a grave and steadfast facing of tragedy, a powerful turning. The "O the heavy change now thou art gone!" of *Lycidas*, whether an influence or not, is very close structurally and in tone. The last line of the section, like the last line of every section except VII, "opens" (that is, is longer than the preceding lines), completing meaning and rhythm. Rhythm and meaning cohere throughout the poem. The most important words "glory," "dream," and "common" reappear in strong places later in the poem.

The second section is quieter, lovelier, lighter. It presents natural beauty as the poet sees it in the Now: a good thing, but far less good than the beauty of the celestial

light. The last verse opens and deepens, in sound and meaning, repeating the theme: “. . . there hath past away a glory from the earth.”

The third and fourth sections parallel the second in that they concern natural beauty as seen by the grown man, but differ from the second section in that they represent a deliberately not-quite-successful attempt to express a far more ecstatic response, a response that the poet *argues* to be proper (in “O evil day! If I were sullen . . .”), a response to the natural earth as a given and great good. Nature is good: *therefore* his evil mood was improper. Hence he expels it by a “timely utterance” (whether *My Heart Leaps Up, Resolution and Independence*,<sup>19</sup> or the first two sections of this poem does not greatly matter—the first two sections of the poem would best serve the poem’s clarity, but the “gave,” in idiom if not logic, seems against the interpretation). The astonishing rhetorical performance makes excellent poetry. But a greater and simpler rhetoric, a greater poetry, and a greater propriety bring the section to a close.

But there's a Tree, of many, one,  
A single Field which I have looked upon,  
Both of them speak of something that is gone:  
    The Pansy at my feet  
    Doth the same tale repeat:  
Whither is fled the visionary gleam?  
Where is it now, the glory and the dream?

These lines are one of the greatest and most beautiful reversals of mood in any poetry. The propriety is absolute. The sudden recognition that supernatural glory is lost *makes* natural glory nothing. The lament, the approach of despair, is rationally motivated. In fact, Wordsworth here finds a solid ground for an apparently irrational reversal of mood. To look on some object and be depressed without apparent

reason is a fairly common experience. But here, *since* the object seen is a reminder of the loss of the supernatural vision, the depression is explained and justified. The point is, and it is major, that the emotion should be consonant with reality. Wordsworth is concerned with that consonance.

The questions sound rhetorical (intended to convey a mood of depression rather than offered as questions to be answered); they also sound unanswerable. But they are neither. The fifth section is an answer to them. Man comes from God; he sees the celestial light and "whence it flows"; the prison house none the less closes down; and the vision fades into "the light of common day."

The next section offers a slight consolation, a minor attempt to build back up the response to nature of sections III and IV. It is mild and apologetic in tone. Nature does what she can for her "Foster-child" to make him forget. She has "pleasures of her own." She is "not unworthy." Aesthetically the section acts as an interlude, a rest, between the parts of greater power (the phrase "Foster-child" should put down for once and all any attempt to make the poem naturalistic).

Section VII is the least prized, but I must confess a liking for it. It is appropriate in its place, as a mildly comic amplification of the mild sixth section. The comedy is appropriately aimed at provoking the kind of smile with which people respond to children taking their childlike and mimetic activities solemnly. The humor also conveys that the adult activities the children imitate, seen with the mystic's eye, are not much. It diminishes, without angrily rejecting, the claims of the world (Jones Very's line "For you are far away among time's toys" and Coventry Patmore's poem *The Toys* come to mind as like expressions of a Christian and mystical commonplace.) Wordsworth's humor is always apt to be mostly thumbs; here it is uneven, yet pleasant, and the sound—light, tripping, delicately chang-



ing—is amusing and fit. The seventh section also provides, by contrast, for the sudden and mighty change to section VIII.

Thou, whose exterior semblance doth belie  
 Thy Soul's immensity;  
 Thou best Philosopher, who yet does keep  
 Thy heritage, thou Eye among the blind  
 That, deaf and silent, read'st the eternal deep,  
 Haunted for ever by the eternal mind,—  
 Mighty Prophet! Seer blest!  
 On whom those truths do rest,  
 Which we are toiling all our lives to find,  
 In darkness lost, the darkness of the grave;  
 Thou, over whom thy Immortality  
 Broods like the Day, a Master o'er a Slave,  
 A Presence which is not to be put by;  
 Thou little Child, yet glorious in thy might  
 Of heaven-born freedom on thy being's height,  
 Why with such earnest pain dost thou provoke  
 The years to bring the inevitable yoke,  
 Thus blindly with thy blessedness at strife?  
 Full soon thy Soul shall have her earthly freight,  
 And custom lie upon thee with a weight,  
 Heavy as frost, and deep almost as life!

The reader has to wait for the address in the Ode (except for the brief address of the shepherd boy). When it comes, it comes with might and with propriety.

From Coleridge through Irving Babbitt and other twentieth-century critics, there has been much adverse criticism of these "hyperbolic" praises. Yet the praise—there is no more stupendous praise in literature—is just. The child is praised because he has in his power to "behold the light, and whence it flows"—that is, because he can see God. One can fit to this Christian ideas of innocence and Christ's praise of children. If one universalizes the praise, as the poem technically does, the child being presumably any child, one can infer from it the proposition "All children are



mystics." The proposition perturbs. Yet it may be true, regardless of how much else is mixed up in the child with the capacity to look on the divine: the egoism of original sin, the (let us remember innocent) sexual and biological drives. Something like that idea is present in our feelings for the sacredness of innocence, in our frequent intuition that children have their depths. But, irrespective of the truth or falsity of that proposition, Wordsworth, like Vaughan, *remembered*, and it is of children such as the child he remembered himself to be that Wordsworth speaks. H. N. Fairchild implies that the memory is an egoistic delusion, but the memory is Wordsworth's, not Fairchild's, and Wordsworth speaks with a voice authoritative of great experience.

Even if Fairchild and Babbitt were right about Wordsworth, the verses are still perfectly proper: the praise is of a child who does in fact have the supernatural vision. A vision of ultimate reality is superior to lesser knowledge. One may deny (in the teeth of enormous evidence) the real existence of such vision; one may not rationally deny that, if it exists, it is superior knowledge. Therefore the child is a "best Philosopher," a "seer blest," a "Mighty Prophet." Wordsworth expresses with almost unbelievable power, not the knowledge which is in a strict sense inexpressible, but a desperate and profound longing for the experience, something of the memory of it, the impersonal glory of being able to claim once having had it, and by analogy something of the quality of the experience. The violent mixing of senses which Coleridge objected to, the Eye that is deaf, silent and haunted, is justified by the precedent of Milton's "blind mouths" and exceeds it as powerful and right for the vision that exceeds sense. The "deaf and silent" is a precise description of unitive mysticism. The mystic does not hear the world, he cannot, except by analogical and paradoxical translation, speak what he sees. But even the translation is

one of the greatest of human treasures. Natural imagery in this section stands for the vision rather than being the place where the light shines: instead of the celestial light on actual meadows and streams there is the "deep," the brooding immortality, the Presence, then in section ix the embers, the fountain-light, the immortal sea.

The thought of the last three sections is more intricate than what has gone before. I shall not attempt to trace every wrinkle of it. Rather I would say that Wordsworth casts about to find ways to reconcile himself to a lesser existence; he finds them—overlapping, not quite consistent, tragic.

The deep lament that ends the eighth section is a lament for exactly the same state of spirit that is a cause of rejoicing in the ninth section. The eighth ends with the lament that custom lies on the glory "deep almost" as life; in the ninth he rejoices that nothing, including custom, can "utterly abolish" the truth of the vision. He rejoices that something remains, in memory and in the invisible foundations of our life.

Here again he is intent on propriety, on building a justified poem. "Not for these I raise/ the song of thanks and praise." The song must praise what deserves praise. Not for natural liberty, for delight in nature (which he so often elsewhere praised), but for fugitive, occasional, idealistic hints of what exceeds nature, compared to which nature is naught. The fugitively remembered vision can be partly reinstated by memory; it supplies a standard by which all lesser human activities ("our noisy years") can be judged; and it somehow, obscurely, validates the affections and underwrites the understanding. The last two lines have, perhaps accidentally, a distinct propriety. One can, from inland, travel to the great Sea (in memory); then what one sees is the children; one is removed a step from the direct vision the children enjoy.<sup>20</sup>

In the tenth and in the last (eleventh) section, he addresses the birds and (a little indirectly) the lambs, returning to the creatures of section III, and then moves on to the other claims of life. He can, as properly he should, rejoice with the animals, and this joy will not be cut off by grievous recognition. Why? Because he has recognized, faced, and accepted the inalienable fact of tragedy. We must enjoy life as we may, knowing that the greatest glory is permanently lost. The beauty of nature, the soothing thoughts that spring from suffering, even (strangely out of place in such a context) Christian faith; the years that bring stoic maturity; the sobering and deepening recognition of mortality, of the human heart—all are less than, yet founded upon, the rock of the hidden childhood vision of the divine. One cannot in reality take the last four lines to mean what *Tintern Abbey* and *The Prelude* mean: that nature providentially guides the heart that loves her, that the true growth of the character is "natural piety." For what the flower teaches is the insufficiency of nature and of human life to supply the truth once known. The recognition of this loss is so tragic that the proper response is not grief, but grim, resolute acceptance. The resolution, independence, and courage of this view is, as Trilling says (a fine mind with whom I have earlier disagreed with reluctance), very real and highly admirable.

What is curious about the situation is that Wordsworth is so perfectly and entirely convinced that the real vision is not possible after childhood. This view is inconsistent not only with *Tintern Abbey* and the even more impressive experience at Simpton Plain described in *The Prelude*, but with the experience of other mystics. Where else shall we find an ex-mystic? Is this an evidence for the non-genuineness or imperfection of the experience that Wordsworth remembered? Is he merely an egoist who wanted, like Poe, Shelley, or Hart Crane, an infinite into which to expand his private

feelings? Perhaps. I do not really believe it. Even if so, there is a very real and valid religious element in all romanticism, however involved it may be with the unredeemed ego, the natural man.

Besides, Wordsworth endured. His masculine and persistent toughness of moral fiber sets him off from the other great English Romantics as much as (no, even more than) the deeper quality of his vision and his greater and more sustained artistic mastery. And to say he is the greatest English Romantic is a high compliment indeed.

His religion is limited. It lacks a sense of sin, of the Atonement, of redemption, of the theological virtue of hope. It is by Christian standards (and they are true standards) defective. But within its limits it is not only powerfully affective and beautifully expressed, but strongly achieved. His religion includes his sense of vocation as a poet; Wordsworth was deeply faithful to his vision. His dedication was no idle thing, or occasional thing, or spineless thing. He is a heroic person as well as one of the greatest poets, whatever his limits. Then, too, writers like Babbitt, Paul Elmer More, and Fairchild (I have a great respect for each and all of them; I have learned much from them) are somewhat too quick, perhaps heretically quick, to consign the Holy Ghost to too narrow channels. "The Spirit bloweth where it listeth." That we have on good authority.

Wordsworth delights. He delights because he turns mind away from the petty to the grand, the moral, and the holy. His instruction has defects; defects set limits. He is too much his subject; the presence of humanity is too muted in his verse; he chose a major subject, his own epiphanies, which shrank; in a sense he is narrow (but to say that is to remind oneself of the width and variety of subject and treatment of which he was capable). Yet the instruction has its greatness too. The Intimations Ode is the greatest ode in the language.

Part of the reason is that Wordsworth found a subject that transcended his normal subjects and that led him beyond his excellent eye to see human life against supernature. Another reason is his conscious and emulative mastery of techniques, techniques he molds and remolds to subject with a profound and overt sense of consonance to reality—that is to say, of propriety.

Tate is ironically conscious of the proprieties of the genre, as he says in "Narcissus as Narcissus,"<sup>21</sup> his essay on his *Ode to the Confederate Dead*. That irony is itself a propriety: proper to the view of reality taken in the poem, to the doubts of the poem. He fashions his poem on the traditional ode, the genre felt as a genre, but with ironic reversals and twists. The ode is, to repeat too simple a formula, a public poem of address on a great subject, attempting the sublime and magnificent. Tate's poem is not public; no one is addressed (except when the speaker addresses himself), not even the Confederate soldiers the poem is "to." The ostensible subject, the heroism of the Southern soldiers, fails, when the subject becomes in the vision but a few wind-driven leaves, trivial and meaningless. Sublimity and magnificence break off into ragged rhythms, into blunt staring at the empty face of death. Hence the poem goes against the historical ode in several ways. But not by failure to achieve its ends. By deliberation. The poem is consciously *about* the failure of the heroic imagination and (perhaps unconsciously) about the failure of agrarian and chivalric ideals.

Looked at in a better, only apparently inconsistent way, the poem does fulfill the requirements of the traditional ode. The poem is public: it is meant for modern people everywhere. The subject is great: the plight of modern society, the failure of great vision, the ultimate omnipotence of death, the alien power of brute nature. It expresses the



negative counterparts of sublimity and magnificence. It looks with tragic vigor and depth upon its subjects and speaks with a powerful rhetoric about them. Irony, anger, desperation, and determined courage are the proper emotions expressed in the poem.

Tate tells us in his essay that the poem concerns man in a "fragmentary cosmos," that the chief subject is solipsism (which Tate defines, consciously putting aside its traditional philosophic meaning, as an excessive concern with the self). The concern for the self is strong and memorable: the lone man by the gate stands in fear, in intellectual rage, is caught in strong images—a crab, a mummy, a jaguar. Yet he and his plight are not the most memorable subject. The poem chiefly concerns, not the self, but the physical world: powerful, real, enormous, bleak, alien, deadly.

The poem does not express struggles with doubt, rather unsuccessful struggles with solid conviction. The poem stands on a firmly built ontological base: the metaphysics of modern atheism, of positivism. The physical world is temporally and metaphysically prior to man and will outlast him; its laws are ultimate; man is an accident in it; his activity is brief, his isolation actual, his meanings illusion. Only (a large "only") the poem finds such convictions occasion for rage and despair rather than for the delight and arrogant sense of power many modern thinkers draw from them.

The poem begins with that metaphysics. "Row after row with strict impunity,/ The headstones yield their names to the element," and ends with it, "the grave who counts us all." In between, the speaker attempts to throw up against that reality a vision, a lofty rhetoric, a heroic rhyme, but they crumble and the solid, stupid earth remains. In the struggle, and the rhetoric, death and the universe become more than unconscious; they become demonic (as they do



in Stephen Crane's "The Open Boat" or the novels and poems of Thomas Hardy). Rhetoric naturally personifies; that is part of the explanation. What hurts or overwhelms man seems to him like a human enemy; men naturally overpress the analogy. That is another, overlapping part of the explanation. But they do not comprise the whole explanation. Man's natural and inalienable (if twisted) religious sense seeks God even in nothingness: *therefore* the figure of personification is natural to man. Also men remember or intuit the deep wounds that have come to them from evil will. The naturalistic despair of the poem is shadowed by a darker cast.

The patterning, the formal structure of the poem, is an alternation, a struggle of motive, the motives of heroic vision and of despair, interlaced and complicated by the introspection which serves as a third major theme and as an expressive commentary. Like those in Wordsworth's Ode, the links tend to be more associative than logical, compared to the transitions of *Lycidas* or *Anne Killigrew*. Yet the structure is much firmer than that of comparable modern poems: *The Bridge*, *The Cantos*, *The Waste Land*. Tate has the wit to invent a speaker so that the associative thoughts are formally embodied, given some dramatic place. The themes of the poem are more clearly marked and more precisely drawn to conclusion than the themes of most longer modern poems. Tate is also more than most of the others (excluding Eliot) willing to speak abstractly (in spite of his professed poetics at the time of the Ode, which insisted on a much heavier weight being laid on imagery than on conceptual statement).

The metrical convention is irregularly rhymed and freely handled iambic, pentameter being the norm, but a norm varied by shorter lines, by an unusual amount of substitution of other feet, by defective feet, and by four inter-

polated bits of free verse (in essentially falling rhythm) of two lines each (which were added only in revision.)<sup>22</sup> Tate tells us that the model for the rhyme was *Lycidas* and that the sections that attempt the conventionally heroic adhere more closely to the iambic norm than the other sections. But even the heroic sections are relatively freely handled.

The address is internal. The lone man by the gate speaks to no one, or to anyone who will listen, or to himself. Apostrophe presumes an ontological ease that he lacks. In the first section he presents the scene and the sombre theme.

Rów ăfter rów/ with strict/ impún/ity/

The héad/stónes yíeld/ theír námes/ tŏ the é/ément,/

The wind/ whirrs wíth/out récolléction;

In the ríven troughs/ the splayed/ léaves/

Píle úp,/ of náture the casuál sacráment/

Tŏ the seasónal/ éternítý/ of déath;/

Then dríven by/ the fierce scrútiny/

Ōf héaven tŏ theír/ électíon in the/ vast bréath,/

Theý sough/ the rúm/our ōf/ mórtalítý/.\*

The "rumour" is the classical *fama*, report; and the report is true. The strange struggle, metrical and rhetorical and thematic, between excessive violence and constrained dignity constitutes the special convention of the poem. The struggle is at times extreme, but felt as proper to the tension between bitter "fact" and traditional hopes.

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\*In scansion I use the following arbitrary symbols: × unaccented syllable; / accented; # light accented syllable; \ heavy unaccented syllable; / foot; ˆ elision; # and \ are used only to mark special effects; any accented syllable may be marked / , any unaccented × .

In this section, only the last line has five normal iambs.<sup>23</sup> (The second line I would scan as iambic, but with an elision that could be construed as an anapestic substitution; and the line is very irregular in sound.) The last line represents the first resolution (on the side of brute fact) of the continuing struggle.

The "strict impunity" is like the "remorseless deep" of *Lycidas* except that Tate more certainly intends the double meaning. In the strictest sense imaginable, the headstones cannot be punished: they cannot feel. Yet at the same time the phrase makes them sound hostile, criminal, and secure. The same kind of "ambiguity" (if one wishes to call it that) runs throughout the poem, and typifies much natural imagery in modern poetry. It is, for all its violence, a tamer sort of pathetic fallacy, tamer because one term of the ambiguity is factually true. The wind is in fact "without recollection"; the poem makes it sound as though the wind had forgotten. But the device is not merely a trick of language; the sense of inhuman and alien will that pervades the poem is one of its greatest and most sincere powers.

The language itself deepens in the next lines; the dichotomy between conscious and unconscious remains. The sacrament is casual, by chance, since the leaves pile up at random; it is a sacrament since the broken leaves are an outer and visible symbol of invisible death. The "seasonal eternity" is perhaps too mannered a paradox. The "scrutiny" (in the sense of a taking of individual votes for the purpose of elevating to a high office) is accomplished by the precise, individual response of each leaf to the wind. Election exists in another sense, the Calvinist sense of unalterable determinism. The leaves give their votes, but have no choice whatever, in a blind parody of democracy. So it is with death: all men give their vote for death by the simple act of dying, but have no say in the matter. Heaven (here standing for

physical nature) and death are identified in religious language. They have the final, demonic power. They have the last say.

Against this fierceness, the second section introduces the Confederate dead, poses a brief consolation that collapses and leads into the mind of the observer, the isolated consciousness in an alien world.

Autumn/is desolation in/the plot/  
 Of a thousand acres where/these memories grow/  
 From the inexhaustible bodies that/are not/  
 Dead, but/feed the/grass row/after/rich row./  
 Think of/the autumns that/have come/and gone!—/  
 Ambitious November with/the humors of/the year,/  
 With a/particular zeal/for every slab,/  
 Staining/the uncomfortable angels that rot/  
 On the slabs,/a wing/chipped here,/an arm/there./  
 The brute/curiosity of/an angel's stare/  
 Turns you,/like them,/to stone/  
 Transforms/the heaving air/  
 Till plunged/to a heavier world/below/  
 You shift/your sea/space blindly/  
 Heaving/turning/like the/blind crab./

November is ambitious because he is a madman ambitious to destroy. The imitative form is evident, particularly in the change of rhythm to indicate the transfer to the inner world. It is not the most supple and varied of poetic techniques. Yvor Winters is right in maintaining that traditional verse that stays closer to the norm can do more than can imitative form, and Tate expresses as much horror as this more tersely and convincingly in some passages of *Seasons*

of the *Soul*, which is in tightly reined iambic trimeter. But that is not to say that imitative variation of form (which is merely an extreme extension of the fundamental idea of propriety between form and meaning) cannot be powerful. It is powerful here, both in the shift to the short, writhing lines and in such a curious strong line as "On the slabs, a wing chipped here, an arm there" which imitates brokenness, which almost defies scansion, but which is referable to iambic pentameter, with an anapestic and a trochaic substitution and a defective foot (which combines with the anapestic substitution to leave ten syllables in the line):

On<sup>x</sup> the<sup>x</sup> slabs,<sup>/</sup> a<sup>x</sup> wing<sup>/</sup> chipped here,<sup>/</sup> an<sup>x</sup> arm<sup>/</sup> there.<sup>/</sup>

The angels are stone, the only angels the narrator can grant existence to, and they are broken and ugly. Angels are but man's invention; time does not even allow them continuance as inventions. The hint is added that they are "brute," that is fallen angels, devils.

The first interpolated patch of free verse follows that section, having less obvious fitness than the later ones possess. What it seems to suggest is that the inner world is unreal compared to the outer. The leaves are real, the sea-space merely subjective. This fits the tendency of the poem, which is as much an anti-solipsistic poem as it is a poem expressing solipsism (even in Tate's special sense of "concern with self").

In the philosophical sense, solipsism is the doctrine that only the individual self is real, that the physical world and other people exist only in that *one* self. In the poem, the physical world is indissolubly real, and the self is, relative to it, a self-agonized kind of delusion.

The third section is a more important piece of introspection.

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THREE ODES

---

You know who have waited by the wall  
The twilight certainty of an animal,  
Those midnight restitutions of the blood  
You know—the immitigable pines, the smoky frieze  
Of the sky, the sudden call: you know the rage,  
The cold pool left by the mounting flood,  
Of muted Zeno and Parmenides,  
You who have waited for the angry resolution  
Of those desires that should be yours tomorrow,  
You know the unimportant shrift of death  
And praise the vision  
And praise the arrogant circumstance  
Of those who fell  
Rank upon rank, hurried beyond decision—  
Here by the sagging gate, stopped by the wall.

The “lone man by the gate” speaks to himself. He reviews his memory of emotional states. He has known animal, unintellectual brooding. The animals have “certainty” because they have no *intellectual* doubts or fears. The restitution is to nature, the proper owner of the blood. Probably “certainty” is a defect. It is obscure, and it is wrong. We are not at all certain what the animals know or feel; from the evidence we have they probably feel a good deal of doubt and fear. Be that as it may, the passage conveys powerfully a human state of mind: a dark return to nature, a dark somnolent nighttime brooding, an envy of the animals who do not have our problems. The epithet “immitigable” is probably the single word that most strongly expresses the brute, irreducible reality of physical nature. We cannot appease the pines for the same reason that we cannot punish the stones. In context, the “sudden call” means the call of nature in the blood, though there are supernatural overtones as well. It is very like the voice of madness calling out of darkness in Edwin Arlington Robinson’s *Luke Havergal*, a poem which Tate has expressed a public admiration for



and which, he once said in conversation, was probably a strong, if at the time unconscious, influence on the Ode.

The speaker has known intellectual rage, the seemingly just rage of the mind at the enigma of the world. The "mounting flood" is an image for a state of rage. The "cold pool" is less clear, at least less translatable. Tate has always approved of relatively untranslatable images; yet the intellectual reference of his images is more apt to be difficult than genuinely obscure. Is the pool the icy hate that remains after the rage subsides? Is it the ideas that result from and outlast the access of rage? Is it the "cold" intellectual facing of the outrageous fact of the world's unintelligibility? Zeno and Parmenides are present because they expressed major paradoxes, and because Parmenides does what the narrator would do, but cannot: deny as mere appearance the physical world of change. The philosophers are "muted" (I take it) because they are dead. Thus physical nature refutes Parmenides!

The speaker has also known specifically human emotions: hope, expectation of desire and resolution, anger. There seems to be some sort of logically causal relation between knowing these emotions and knowing that death is unimportant, or so the idiom suggests. The argument (I suggest with some hesitancy, filling in from elsewhere in Tate's writings) goes something like this: what man can do in the face of a stupid world and stupidly triumphant death is to act; to act heroically and excessively. As he says in another poem, "In killing there is more than commentary." That action includes the raising up of a set of human values, and chivalric standards. Whatever the enigma of the world, whatever ground or lack of ground there is for values, full-hearted heroism is admirable. Man refutes death by a blithe unconcern for it. The Confederate soldiers, then, with their arrogant vision and self-sacrificing heroism, are justly to be

praised. But this hope turns out to be emotionally as well as metaphysically groundless. The speaker cannot sustain it. He imagines the Confederate soldiers charging in battle, but *really* there are only leaves blowing in the wind, the physical universe setting forth its ontological claims once more. The moment of high praise breaks down.

But, having had the vision, the narrator cannot forget it. It is, to quote Tate elsewhere, an "imperative of reference" by which the unheroic modern world can be (emotionally) judged. The man turns back to the vision in the next section. It cannot last, but he can curse its departure and the world that destroys it.

Turn your eyes to the immoderate past,  
Turn to the inscrutable infantry rising  
Demons out of the earth—they will not last.  
Stonewall, Stonewall, and the sunken fields of hemp,  
Shiloh, Antietam, Malvern Hill, Bull Run.  
Lost in the orient of that thick-and-fast  
You will curse the setting sun.

Cursing only the leaves crying  
Like an old man in a storm.

The "old man in a storm" is not King Lear, though there may be an ironic reference to Lear, whose rage was meaningful, who cursed more than leaves. The old man is diminished by the physical elements and he cannot control them.

The next section, an interlude, sharpens the theme.

You hear the shout, the crazy hemlocks point  
With troubled fingers to the silence which  
Smothers you, a mummy, in time.

The hound bitch  
Toothless and dying, in a musty cellar  
Hears the wind only.

The man hears the shout of the soldiers, the rebel yell, but the hemlocks ("crazy" because of their ragged appearance and because they act by inhuman standards), which represent physical nature once more, "point out" that only silence obtains about the past. The man is a mummy, because he is swaddled in a heavy wrapping of time, cut off from the past and from heroic vision, and therefore dead. The hound bitch's undeluded ears hear the wind only. She also represents (too easily) the decay of a hunting and chivalric people. The influence of T. S. Eliot's *The Hollow Men* on this interlude, both in image and movement, is clear; but this passage is more affecting than that easily rhythmized parody of despair.

The next section, which is something of an ironic Dance of Death, reiterates the themes. Here are the helplessness and meaninglessness of human values in a universe of chance. Here is the unforgettable memory of a greater view of life.

Now that the salt of their blood  
Stiffens the saltier oblivion of the sea,  
Seals the malignant purity of the flood,  
What shall we who count our days and bow  
Our heads with a commemorial woe  
In the ribboned coats of grim felicity,  
What shall we say of the bones, unclean,  
Whose verdurous anonymity will grow?  
The ragged arms, the ragged heads and eyes  
Lost in these acres of the insane green?  
The grey lean spiders come, they come and go;  
In a tangle of willows without light  
The singular screech-owl's tight  
Invisible lyric seeds the mind  
With the furious murmur of their chivalry.

We shall say only the leaves,  
Flying, plunge and expire.

The last full section repeats the themes and concentrates them into tragic, ethical questions.

We shall say only the leaves whispering  
In the improbable mist of nightfall  
That flies on multiple wing;  
Night is the beginning and the end  
And in between the ends of distraction  
Waits mute speculation, the patient curse  
That stones the eyes, or like the jaguar leaps  
For his own image in a jungle pool, his victim.  
What shall we say who have had knowledge  
Carried to the heart? Shall we take the act  
To the grave? Shall we, more hopeful, set up the  
grave  
In the house? The ravenous grave?

The patient curse and the self-destroying jaguar, whatever their faults as images, a subject about which Yvor Winters has commented,<sup>24</sup> carry the meaning forward. Speculation is self-destroying; it proves its own emptiness and its own lack of authority. Facts are facts; night is the beginning and the end.

One can object, cogently enough as argument, that the atheistic conclusion "Night is the beginning and the end" is as much a speculation as any other, not a fact to weigh speculation against, but the argument is beside the major critical point. The poem shows a man caught in the assumptions of his time and hating those assumptions, wishing to oppose them with past values.

The "knowledge" is the knowledge of the stubborn reality of death, of the illusory, "projective" nature of value. Grant it, as the speaker does, and the dilemma in the questions is real, and vicious. "Shall we take the act to the grave?," forget what is noble in our heritage, live like sly, well-adjusted animals? Or shall we set up the grave, the past,

in the house, so that our lives are eaten up by an unreality which we can neither believe in nor reject?

The poem ends, traditionally enough, with a formal leave-taking, but (untraditionally) with no resolution of the theme. Death is the beginning and the end of the poem.

Leave now

The shut gate and the decomposing wall:  
The gentle serpent, green in the mulberry bush,  
Riots with his tongue through the hush—  
Sentinel of the grave who counts us all!

The poem is highly emulative. What it imitates is absorbed. The tone is consistently the poem's own. I have mentioned E. A. Robinson's *Luke Havergal*, a poem in which a bereaved lover stands by a grave, in darkness and falling leaves and despair, awaiting a vision. There is T. S. Eliot, whose *Gerontion* is a chief model for modern poems that express disintegration by form, by associative thoughts as structure. Tate's poem, if less beautiful in some details than *Gerontion*, has a comparable power and much finer form, managing theme with far greater clarity than Eliot's. Various echoes of other poetry appear. The "grim felicity" perhaps echoes Hamlet's line "Absent thyself from felicity awhile." At least "felicity" in Tate's poem is considerably obscure if one does not know the passage in Hamlet. As we earlier saw, the "old man in the storm" may suggest Lear. I think that the falling rhythms of the free verse owe something to the verse of Archibald MacLeish, on which Tate has perceptively written.<sup>25</sup> Tate wisely uses that sort of verse for interlude rather than for poetic substance. The "crab" comes, almost certainly, from Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*: "I should have been a pair of ragged claws/ Scuttling across the floors of silent seas." The "mummy" probably comes from Yeats' use of the image. The ir-

regular rhyming. Tate informs us, was modeled on *Lycidas*.

The violent odd adjectives, which are individually exciting but excessively used, and the various paradoxical and ironic twists come from "Donne," that is from the new critics' views about Donne. The use of Latinate words in archaic, or at least etymologically conscious, ways, exhibit the poet's classical learning which he often uses directly in other poems. Some examples are "casual," "scrutiny," "distraction" (a tearing apart), "inscrutable," "malignant."

Most important of all, he consciously works in and remolds the genre: in his handling of address, the formal occasion, the modulation of sections, the formal leave-taking, the iambic freedom, the balance and formal resolution of themes, the great subject. Most of what I have said about the poem shows how Tate accepts and changes, works ironies on and keeps faith with the genre. The fundamental propriety of the poem is in his refashioning of the genre, within formal limits, to deal with the *collapse* of vision.

Tate's poem is very special, the product of a distinct and rare state of mind. It required a great belief in past order, in the dignity of literature and of heroic action, a flat acceptance of and a fierce hatred for modern beliefs that undercut, at the roots, that dignity. There is something heroic in the very fact that he writes the poem. He uses an old and excellent institution, the English Pindaric Ode, to express a view of things in which the idea of excellence becomes meaningless.

One may argue that the poem is fundamentally confused. I would deny that, at least in a major sense. Rather I would maintain that modern thinkers are confused who think they can find real values, valid ethics, in a world they believe purposeless, accidental, valueless, and uncreated. The rage, despair, and clearly expressed emotional confusion of the poem is a more proper response to that vision of



things than the enthusiasm with which others accept it. But I am not arguing modern world-views; I am arguing propriety. The point is, that the very idea of better and worse emotional response requires the idea of propriety, and those who see in such responses as this one a poet's refusal to face "modern realities" or such, are accepting my standard: that there are proper responses of attitude to reality. Which is what I contend.

Dryden's poem is a vision of highly civilized human life seen in the light of eternity. Wordsworth's poem is a poem about the tragic failure of a vision of eternity, but, in speaking to its subject, it magnificently and tragically re-creates an analogue of that vision; Tate's poem is about the failure of vision; in the telling the poem becomes a great vision of death, of a world in which the light of eternity does not shine. Dryden's poem is impersonal. His personality is separate from subject, except briefly when he speaks of his poetry; he looks out on a world. Wordsworth's poem is intensely and autobiographically personal, but the subject is the relations of that person to eternity and to nature, liaisons as well as alienation. Tate's poem is formally impersonal, though his speaker shares many of the poet's ideas and desires. The alienation is more complete than in Wordsworth's poem. The individual has lost touch with eternity and with any healthful relation to physical nature. The poems manifest a progressive breakdown of belief. They share and pass on a deep belief in the validity and high value of literature and of a particular, tested, difficult, magnificent kind. If that kind had not existed, as a historical fact, we could not have had these three poems. Which is an extremely good argument for the kind.

# 6

## *The Longer Kinds in this Century*

IN THIS CENTURY (as in much of the nineteenth) the poetic kind that prevails is the lyric, especially meditative, self-expressive, or associative lyrics. The modern lyric may be as a rule less coherently and logically formed than sixteenth and seventeenth century lyrics, as J. V. Cunningham<sup>1</sup> and Rosemond Tuve<sup>2</sup> have argued. Even so, many have achieved considerable precision of form as well as beauty of expression. The twentieth century may even be one of the more important periods of poetry. At least the number of poets who have written well is very impressive, and, granting the notorious difficulty of judging current work in anything like fair historical perspective, I would judge that more twentieth century lyrics have high quality and survival value than the lyrics of any period since the seventeenth. W. B. Yeats, E. A. Robinson, Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, W. C. Williams, Edwin Muir, Allen Tate, William Bell, Yvor Winters, Robert Lowell, J. V. Cunningham, Archibald MacLeish, T. S. Eliot, Hart Crane, Louise Bogan, Edward Thomas, Ezra Pound, Vernon Watkins, Richard Wilbur, Edgar Bowers, Donald Justice, James Wright, to name only

some good poets, have all done some work that seems likely to survive. My omission of Auden and Ransom is deliberate: the first is too slapdash, the second too self-consciously and neatly ironic, but I hope I am wrong. I enjoy the poems of both. Marianne Moore may just happen to hit a personal blind spot. She has pleased many good critics. The wonderfully tender and memorable passages in Dylan Thomas will, I fear, be overwhelmed by the amount in his verse of what Dryden would have called "abominable fustian," especially when our memory of the magnificent reading voice fades.

Be that as it may (prophecy, as George Eliot once observed, is gratuitous folly), the lyric has had its successes in this century and in the nineteenth. And the lyric is a great form, perhaps the greatest after the epic and the tragedy. But some hard questions still need asking.

What has happened to longer poems? Or to the multiplicity of kinds within the general kind of lyric? Why has poetry shrunk? In its kinds as well as in its audience?

The historical answer is, of course, not easy. The shift of major attention to prose fiction, the collapse (in many minds) of a religious and meaningful world view, the narrowing path of advancing individualism, the progress of an "unpoetic" industrialism and the growth of a mass society, romantic rage against order, the fragmentation of pluralism and relativism—all are possible if not entirely consistent answers; all have some truth. The truth with respect to relativism is paradoxical: relativism would seem to supply an incalculable diversity of permitted forms, but fails to, in some part because it encourages an increasingly incommunicable sort of individualism and because it radically undercuts public values.

The answer that would most neatly fit the general argument of this book is that critics and poets have departed from good (neo-classical) theory for bad (other) theory and

should repent. They have, and should. But the truth is not quite so neat as simply that.

What complicates the situation in one way is that poets have often not erred. Within the genre of the meditative lyric (and at times in spite of professed theory) they have often kept faith with truth. A poem of the quality of E. A. Robinson's *Eros Turannos* is a just imitation with a very strong and fine sense of what is proper to the kind, the subject, the verse conventions, and the attitudes expressed.<sup>3</sup> One of the reasons that propriety is a permanently sound concept is that, for poems to get written at all, poets must to some degree imitate nature and emulate other poets. What complicates the situation in a different way is that poets cannot simply *will* living forms. They have to work with what they have. Yvor Winters himself, who has attacked such statements as the one I have just made as deterministic and who has exercised great will in a chaotic time, has written only meditative lyrics (extremely good ones, and at least one great one: *To the Holy Spirit*).<sup>4</sup> That is, he has worked in the living form available in his time. Repentance is not enough; and resurrection has always been a difficult feat. But it is no time for another batch of tears because the lot of the modern poet is not a happy one. People have to work with what they have; they should do what they can with it. Some do better than others.

The fact is, ambitious poets want to work in bigger forms; most of the twentieth century poets who have tried have failed. The rest of this chapter will discuss some aspects and examples of that failure seen by the light of neo-classical ideas: imitation of a meaningful nature, a living tradition of genres, formal adequacy, emulation, propriety, moral instruction, high delight.

An important reason for the failure of modern longer poems has been the reliance on the methods of lyric, which

cannot sustain the weight. An important reason for the prevalence of lyric technique has been the prevalence of the Coleridgean notions of organic form, reconciliation and fusion of opposites, and freedom from genres.

The most striking example of a relevant failure is Hart Crane's *The Bridge*. In this poem Crane attempts to unite American history and eternity in a single unified image. "Imagination Creatrix" was John Livingston Lowes' apotheosizing phrase for such a process, and the deification implied in the term is no idle bit of literary fancy. Serious and religious feelings are engaged in the attitude of many critics and poets towards "the shaping spirit of imagination" and it is an idolatry which, taken seriously, has serious results. It leads to lack of control. The personal consequences for Crane were tragic. The poetic consequence was that his short lyrics, those which worked within the compass of a single image or a very few images, were (and remain) richly beautiful, symbolically suggestive but obscure, compressed and profound in meaning and feeling. Not all of his short poems are of this kind, but his most powerful ones, such as *Legend*, *Voyages II* and *VI*, or the Proem to *The Bridge*, are. They are excellent lyrics. Those that are clearer are sometimes charming, but by comparison slight. But his big poem, if it had fused, would have been hopelessly obscure; and, as one could have predicted, it did not fuse. It is, by common critical agreement, a heap of disparate passages. The shaping spirit of imagination did not shape. For imagination refuses to do the work of the fully conscious mind; it does not take the place of understanding. Putting it simply, Crane's poems are rich in delight, but weak in instruction. Because the instruction is defective, his most ambitious poem fails in highly relevant kinds of delight. Allen Tate and Yvor Winters have argued the case cogently.<sup>5</sup> I merely add my vote. Crane failed because he did not abide by permanent



standards. He wanted to "condense eternity," to reach a great vision expressed in a properly great form. He failed because he emulated the wrong kind of poetry, because he accepted bad ideas, because he lacked the comprehension of experience such a poem would require. His language is sometimes defective, through failure of fusion, through flatulence, or through the improper and overstrained binding of too various diction. It is sometimes improper because it is too noble for its content. It is at his best times, and they are frequent, proper and magnificent.

Essentially the same procedure obtains in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, and William Carlos Williams' *Paterson*, though none of these authors intended to "condense eternity." But the principle of the associative lyric, the loosest of forms, governs them. Images and ideas are more or less linked or contrasted; the poet is free to do what he pleases, and he pleases to express incoherence. In *The Waste Land*, but not the other two, that incoherence is a deliberate attempt at propriety. Eliot wished to express the chaotic state of society. The arguments of Winters against his procedure have not been refuted.<sup>6</sup>

It is but two steps from Coleridgean imagination to despair. Coleridge<sup>7</sup> justified his idea of creative imagination by a propriety: the fact that the operation of the artist is like, by distant analogy, the creative power of God. (In Coleridge's excited rhetoric the analogy does not sound very distant.) The next step is to revoke the analogy to God (or simply to ignore Him) and to exalt the holy powers of the imagination, the human power that *creates* the beauty and excellence of its vision. The next step is to say, why deceive ourselves? What the imagination "creates" is of course not real, but an illusory projection which man casts on the world. The values are false. The vacillation between the second and the third steps constitutes much of the poetic



thought of our time. It is almost the whole history of Wallace Stevens' intellectual career. The third step has two inconsistent forms which may co-exist in the same mind (they do in Stevens'). First, reality cannot be known; our experience is a welter of conflicting possibilities and delusions in which we establish temporary modes of order that cannot be genuinely believed in, except in passing. Second, the real world is the physical universe as "known" to normal observation and to science: extended, permanent, accidental, utterly void of moral significance, alien to man. Both forms are, as philosophy, totally unverifiable and radically self-contradictory; but that has not stopped them from taking hold of some (otherwise) highly intelligent minds.

Grant either form, or any mixture of the two, and one thing is flatly and obviously impossible: just correspondence between emotion, idea, and reality (any form of reality, high or low, Heaven or common experience). Therefore poetry (or ethics or simple praise or, for that matter, any human behavior) has no conceivable validity or worth. The last conclusion is literally impossible to live by, and very hard to avoid logically. The poetic result of accepting such ideas is, in fact, vacillation, and considerable impropriety of form and diction. For why put forth arduous and devoted labor when the ardor and devotion always flicker on the edge of delusion?

So briefly, but I fear thoroughly, is Wallace Stevens' career explained. Let us look at two short pieces, before considering the effects of the situation on a longer poem.

Here is the last stanza of *To the One of Fictive Music*, an imperfect but extremely lovely poem I dislike quoting in part. The poet has been addressing a mythical being, a Muse or goddess, who is "sister and mother and diviner love" and who plays a music in which we "give ourselves our likest issuance":

Yet not too like, yet not so like to be  
Too near, too clear, saving a little to endow  
Our feigning with the strange unlike, whence springs  
The difference that heavenly pity brings.  
For this, musician, in your girdle fixed  
Bear other perfumes. On your pale head wear  
A band entwining, set with fatal stones.  
Unreal, give back to us what once we gave:  
The imagination that we spurned and crave.

He takes his subject with almost entire seriousness, and expresses the tragic feelings with great propriety. The loss of great vision is tragic, and hardly to be endured. But the loss is permanent. The prayer is in vain; the goddess is unreal.

It is not, however, easy to address seriously, prayerfully, and for long, an unreal being. In fact it is pretty obviously an unreasonable activity.

Here are the first, third, and fifth (the last) of the sections of *Connoisseur of Chaos*.

I

- A. A violent order is disorder; and  
B. A great disorder is an order. These  
Two things are one. (Pages of illustrations.)

III

After all the pretty contrast of life and death  
Prove that these opposite things partake of one,  
At least that was the theory, when bishops' books  
Resolved the world. We cannot go back to that.  
The squirming facts exceed the squamous mind,  
If one may say so. And yet relation appears,  
A small relation expanding like the shade  
Of a cloud on sand, a shape on the side of the hill.

V

The pensive man . . . He sees that eagle float  
For which the intricate Alps are a single nest.

The poem is "resolved" by an image which is relative to the observer, but the resolution is obviously ironic, and highly tentative. The debate and the confusion will, by their very premises, never end.

Stevens is perfectly aware that the argument undercuts itself at every point, so he complicates, plays with, increases its inconsistencies. He is locked in a philosophical struggle that has become the usurping, compulsive subject of his poetry, but he refuses to take it seriously.

The argument in the poem goes something like this. There is no standard for order; therefore disorder and order are the same; but that proposition makes too simple an order out of the world and therefore must be false; none the less one can establish a certain amount of visual order; but one cannot re-attain the animal innocence of the purely visual; the pensive man (who knows all thought is nonsense, but cannot escape thinking) therefore envies the eagle, who accepts the simple order given (that is, projected and focused) by his visual field.

All of which is to say, no order exists; all order is a projected delusion of the imagination; there is no way through to reality (except maybe, tentatively, to simple physical reality). The subject is the same then as that of *To the One of Fictive Music*. But what a falling off of style! The blank verse is a bit lax, though still basically competent. "Pages of illustration" is a deliberate bumping down into prose out of sheer contempt for the medium. It is a shrug of the shoulders, a gesture of "what's the use?" The style of section III is almost as perverse as the astonishingly ignorant summary of Christian theology and philosophy. Stevens must have felt at a deep level of his personality that Christianity was dead, too deep a level even to read its proponents seriously. The word "pretty" is deliberately and contemptuously diminutive, aimed at Stevens' own thought as well as

at Christian thought. But my main target is "squamous." The alliteration is ugly, the word far-fetched, the metaphor queer. A scaly mind would, one would think, be a good kind of mind to catch wiggly worms on. The line expresses, in a disgruntled and irritable sort of way, a truth that is not the private property of twentieth-century skeptics, but is shared by every serious philosophy and religion: that it is hard to know what is real. He would like to express it absolutely, so as to get rid of all who offer any resolution or understanding of such problems. He considers their activity a cheap evasion of the real human reality, confusion. He also knows that any statement which defines, permanently and universally, the relation between mind and reality contradicts itself if its definition is that mind cannot grasp reality at all. So he puts the statement in a half-heartedly joking metaphor, and mixes boredom and contempt into the tone. *Because* he can find no liaison between reality and mind, he is contemptuous of all rhetoric; all passionate statement; all poetry. Yet he will not give poetry up; he will deliberately debase style and destroy beauty of expression.

One reason he does not give the poetry up is that he is a very serious man, basically, and he, off and on, hopes for a discovery of reality and an honest, splendid, new rhetoric proper to that reality; because, in his own words, "under every no/ Lay a passion for yes that had never been broken."<sup>8</sup>

His one long poem which is not merely an extended, inconclusive, meditative lyric is *The Comedian as the Letter C*. It is a jumble of things in form. Its chief subject is poetic propriety.<sup>9</sup>

The title means that the poem (along with all human discourse) is inadequate to deal with reality. The real living person (Comedian) is represented in discourse by an abstracted, unreal, abbreviating letter (C). Words can never

adequately deal with reality. The last line of the poem says the same thing and, in context, breathes contempt: "So may the relation of each man be clipped."

Since all discourse is totally inadequate, no poetic rhetoric is valid. The subject of the poem is Crispin's search for a poetic style that will fit, do justice to, reality. But such a quest is impossible and silly (as Stevens' title shows that he knows before the poem begins, even though the struggling reader has to figure out what the title means later). Reality exceeds our grasp. Stevens might then have refused to write the poem at all. Or, chastened and humbled by the mystery of the world, he, with Plato, Sophocles, St. Paul and quite a few others (including some bartenders and civil engineers), might have chosen to do the best he could at his work, knowing full well that good work comes hard, that mystery remains, that we "see through a glass darkly." But he does neither. He refuses to abandon the work or to take it seriously. The result is *deliberately* bad style, and a niggling, persistent, self-accusing irony that undercuts everything that is said.

The poem begins:

Nota: man is the intelligence of his soil,  
The sovereign ghost. As such, the Socrates  
Of snails, musician of pears, principium  
And lex. Sed quaeritur: is this same wig  
Of things, this nincompated pedagogue,  
Preceptor to the sea? Crispin at sea  
Created, in his day, a touch of doubt.

The first line is Stevens' version of Genesis i.26: "And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and . . . over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth." The line



also includes the classical injunction that mind should rule the body. Except that Stevens goes on to question man's dominion over the sea and is everywhere infesting his statement with irony. The "sovereign ghost" is satiric, suggesting that nothing so insubstantial and epiphenomenal as mere human consciousness could really have any mastery in the real physical universe.

Some of the satiric touches are, as satire, excellent: "nincompated pedagogue" is a delicious phrase. But Stevens refuses, and the refusal is fatal to the style of the poem, to admit any distinction of degrees. Granting that man is by the best standards he can envision a nincompated and considerable mess, most of us wish to admit some degrees of knowledge and of behavior. In fact we have to, to think or act at all.

The last sentence in the passage quoted is, in tone, insufferably modern. The tonal implication, backed up by much Stevens says elsewhere, is that the writers of the Bible, classical writers, medieval theologians, and such, had an easy time, relying on a cosy, simple view of things and never thinking about them, while we moderns have a very hard time, facing with keen thought some real problems. The same problems, and a few more serious, were faced, with a more profound agony, a more lucid intelligence, and a more proper style, by the author of the Book of Job.

Who is this Crispin, and what kind of poem records his adventures? Crispin is a poet and in some queer ironic sense the typical poet. He seeks a proper experience, a proper subject and a proper style. He is also a comedian, a valet, a rogue, a daughter-pecked father, an "imperative haw of hum," this and that. Any satiric stick is good enough to beat him with, presumably because he is a poet of serious intentions.

The poem is a collage of a number of kinds: it is (pri-



marily) a didactic poem about the nature of poetry and man, Stevens' version of Pope's *Essay on Criticism* and *Essay on Man*; it is the history of a poet's mind, particularly his relation to physical nature, of a poet's growth in undertaking to write a great poem, Stevens' version of Wordsworth's *The Prelude*; it is a picaresque comic narrative, the narrative however being the merest excuse for the sprawling aesthetic and metaphysical commentary and the preposterous style. It is a mock-epic. Stevens works in a tradition of romantic irony and raises it to a major and structural element of a longer poem. The poem presumes and argues the absurdity of poetry, corrodes itself merrily and fecklessly along. It is a very curious object, yet it is written by a poet with tremendous talent, who has written great poetry.

One feature of it is very easy to understand and very hard to excuse. It is *deliberately* bad. This is easy to understand, since the poem presumes the impossibility and absurdity of attempting to write good poetry. It is hard to excuse, because deliberate abuse of talent, deliberate choice of bad style is, if not the worst of poetic sins, certainly the most central.

For all that, reading it is enjoyable. Stevens always provides delight, even in the midst of poetic fiasco. Phrases (a distinct minority, but still quite a few) emerge with the polish of high skill: "He was a man made vivid by the sea"; "Into a savage color he went on"; "That prose should wear a poem's guise at last"; "The words of things entangle and confuse./ The plum survives its poems"; "The salt hung on his spirit like a frost,/ The dead brine melted in him like a dew." One can choose others, but such phrases are inconsistent flashes. The style is, as an intended rule, chunky, obscure, deliberately obstructive of imaginative effects, over-elaborated, self-destructive, pretentiously coy. The style is so mannered that he cannot even take the inscrutable

universe seriously. That man is a nonentity compared to the might of the physical world, is a major argument in the poem. Yet here is how he can write about that world:

. . . silentious porpoises, whose snouts  
Dibbled in waves that were mustachios,  
Inscrutable hair in an inscrutable world.

This, mind you, is the "monstrous world" of Milton's *Lycidas*, the "grisly feendly rokkes blake" of Chaucer's *Franklin's Tale*, the overpowering and awesome world of Job, the nature that inspired the greatest passages of the *Prelude*. To compare it to those works is to show it for what it is: foolishly bad. Or, if that seems unfair, since Stevens is more skeptical than the authors of those works (though he is *not* skeptical about the immensity and inscrutability of the physical world), a comparison with Tate's *Ode to the Confederate Dead*, a poem that deals without a reconciling faith with the same doubts, shows it up quite well enough. Those whose first criterion is originality may choose between admiring this or getting a better standard. The style is distinctly original.

Let us trace the course of the poem's argument (remembering, then putting aside the fact that at *no* point does Stevens or Crispin ever say anything quite seriously). Crispin is a poet seeking a great subject and a great style. He takes a voyage from Europe to America. At sea, the impression of the sea's and nature's magnitude makes him realize he is metaphysically nothing. "Crispin was washed away by magnitude." A little later, the pathetic fallacy is disposed of. The mythologizing of the sea is, in Crispin's mind, with a great effort put by, in order to get at a new and really *real* subject for poems. What remains, what comes of this death, is a "starker, barer self/ In a starker, barer world." Crispin is

presumably now to write with harsh and clear honesty of a real, stark, meaningless world. ". . . The last distortion of romance/ Forsook the insatiable egotist. . . . Crispin beheld and Crispin was made new." An obscure hint that the starkness will provide a new and genuine magnificence ends the first section.

In the second section Crispin arrives in Yucatan. The poetic tradition there is decadent, unrealistic. Sonneteers write of nightingales, ignore indigenous birds. Crispin is not even tempted by them; he seeks out the reality: "Into a savage color he went on." The result of this emancipation is that (by whatever logic) Crispin has become moody, perverse, "difficult and strange/ In all desires," destitute and absurd in his soul. "Sonorous nutshells" rattle in him. He wants huge aggrandizement. He is both a totally stark, bare, and humble observer of the physical reality and a totally impulsive romantic egoist (the contradiction is blunt, unexplained). Now Crispin feels new poetic power: he looks forward to writing great poetry about the jungle, a poetry that will be "tough, diverse, untamed," and magnificent. However, the jungle turns out to be too "juicily opulent" for his aesthetic. A thunderstorm drives him to a cathedral. This "proclamation" of nature's grandeur renews his spirit. In a passage reminiscent of some passages of the *Prelude*, Crispin's mind becomes "free, elate, intent, profound." He looks forward with great hope to writing a great poem imitating what is mountainous and thunderous in nature. He is rededicated to his task.

In the third section, he approaches "Carolina" (that is, the southern United States). He is attracted by moonlight, the delicately lovely, but knows that it crosses his aesthetic. He needs a rank tropic. He arrives at Carolina, and the desire to imitate moonlight (to write lovely and delicate poems, like many of Stevens') disappears. He savors rankness, decays,

and stinks, which purifies his mind of moonshine and of the Wordsworthian desire to write magnificent poems celebrating physical nature. The prose of clear perception in one's daily living matters more than poetry. Therefore he is through with poetry. But maybe not. Maybe the view of the rank will discover its own proper style, the prose "wear a poem's guise at last."

The fourth section begins with the reversal of the phrase that began the poem. Now the "soil is man's intelligence." That is, man is nothing, his consciousness a mere epiphenomenon, the universe deterministically spawns him and thinks him. The spirit is not master. Now (once more!) Crispin has achieved his end, done away with human projections and mythology, is a simon-pure deterministic, monistic materialist. Consciousness is entirely illusion. He has lost his life to save it. Now (by a logic that escapes me) Crispin booms with enthusiasm; he will write great, metaphysically sound poems, hymns celebrating "rankest trivia." This, *nota*, is exactly the same as the achievement of the first section, except that in the first section he would celebrate the "stark" and "bare," here the "rank" and trivial. (Why? goodness knows.) Crispin is full of caprice. He has achieved a one-to-one correspondence between his poetic thought and real reality: rank trivia. We then get a short sample of Crispin's new poetry (not so rankly trivial as some of Stevens' in the poem). Crispin will found a colony, and poets in Georgia, Florida, and Mexico will write, according to the new naturalistic propriety, poems and incantations appropriate to their various landscapes (the criterion of "rank trivia" seems to have deserted Crispin). But the dream of a colony is a mere dream, like the other dreams he has shed. He dismisses the idea of a colony, of an adequate rhetoric. "All dreams are vexing. Let them be expunged. / But let the rabbit run, the cock declaim." The logical conclusion would

be the abolition of poetry, since he has just expunged the colony of poets who were to write naturalistically proper poems. But no. From this new kink will come new realistic poems, "veracious page on page, exact."

The fifth section tells how Crispin's ambitions were lost in everyday existence. The poet gets married and settles down to a pleasant, comfortable, meaningless life. Nowhere in modern literature (a literature that includes *The Waste Land*, *The Deer Park* and *Lolita*, and if you will, the Kinsey Report) is sexual love more trivialized and debased than in these lines. There is some feeble attempt to lament the fact that Crispin has lost his career to "rumpling bottomness" with a "prismy blonde," but it comes to little. By now, it is clear enough that the only sound poetry would be a poetry that presented physical nature in its exact, realistic quality; that such a poetry is not really possible because man is too wholly set off from nature to write about it, because man is too wholly dependent upon nature to control or understand it, and because man's consciousness is entirely an illusion. The contradictions are Stevens', not mine.

In the sixth and last numbered section, Crispin faces a new enemy: daughters, who prevent him from continuing his great poetic career. A very real tenderness insists on creeping into these lines, but Stevens strangles it with a deliberately fake rhetoric and with harsh ironies, since, presumably, to be tender to daughters is unrealistic, incompatible with a philosophy in which a Yucatan parrot's screech is (off and on!) of infinitely more moral and metaphysical importance than man's entire history. The suppression must have been a struggle though. The poem was published in the same book with *Sunday Morning*, *Le Monocle de Mon Oncle*, *To the One of Fictive Music*, and *Peter Quince at the Clavier*, poems which are beautifully sympathetic, even when a bit ironic, in treating women.



The last, unnumbered section is a commentary on the poem. It tells us that "Crispin concocted doctrine from the rout," namely that the world is "the same insoluble lump," that is, that the whole intellectual voyage has been totally profitless and without merit. This motion not only contains several inherent contradictions, but means that the poem is an entire and utter failure. Well, that is all right, we are told. The poem is described to us as, first, a self-satiric yet sound piece of doctrinal statement; then, second, as a hopeless and amateurish failure. It does not matter which it is, Stevens informs us, in one of the most frustrated and frustrating conclusions of any poem:

. . . what can all this matter since  
The relation comes, benignly, to its end?  
So may the relation of each man be clipped.

That is to say, good or bad, this poem is all right, *since* it does not matter in the least what any human discourse says, since all linguistic attempts to convey anything are equally and completely absurd, including the poem and its closing statement.

Since the title, like the conclusion, is committed to that hodge-podge of despair, the poem can do nothing but flounder from notion to notion, all notions being equally untenable (but, somehow, atheistic naturalism less so than others).

The poem assumes and declares not only these self-destructive principles, but a sound one that every serious poet has always and will always act upon: sound poetry depends on a just relating of feeling to reality. This is implied in every line of the poem. But Stevens is also convinced that such a propriety is impossible to achieve, in any degree. The result is muddle, a muddle that dominates the rest of



Stevens' career, even though there are to be beautiful poems, and many beautiful passages, and even though he seldom will write again quite so badly as he does in this poem.

In his later poems he adds some ramification of the projection-perception puzzle to his thinking and, from time to time, notably in *Repetitions of a Young Captain* and *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*, he tries to unite other human concerns (including man's normal, moral, waking life) to his theorizing about poetry and physical reality. And he turns back toward the hope for a really proper rhetoric a number of times. But he never arrives, and he never begins. It is symptomatic that the last line of the last poem in his *Collected Poems* is still trying to make a beginning, to relate a new rhetoric and understanding to physical nature: "It was like/ A new knowledge of reality."

One of the most frustrating things about most of Stevens' later poetry is that we are never again to get "real plums," "good guzzly fruit," though he brags on them. Rather *every* odd particular in his poems stands for the (abstract) particularity of the universe that wrecks all theory. What we get is an endless and querulous theorizing based on radically anti-theoretical premises, endlessly self-defeating. He denies the possibility of instruction. Yet his poetry is so much instruction that it loses in delight.

I can open Stevens anywhere (and often do) and read him with pleasure. I admire his honesty and his persistence (though a steadfast refusal to kid oneself is apt, like most human attitudes, to become a squamous hunk on which can encrust a good many self-delusions). His poetic brilliance and his astonishing verbal intelligence are never in question. No other modern poet has had anything like his gift for language. He did not believe in truth, but he very fervently believed that poetry should be faithful to the truth. And he gives us many splendid moments of poetry. These things are

to be admired, and praised. But I have to agree with Winters that his career is essentially tragic.<sup>10</sup> *Sunday Morning* is a very great lyric. But he could not escape the bounds of the meditative lyric, which wrecks his longer poems; and the content of his meditation narrows in subject and feeds a considerable, corrosive derangement of style. Propriety is a serious business.

T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* is a far more beautiful and successful poem than *The Comedian as the Letter C*. It is a sort of "prelude," only not a prelude, like Wordsworth's, to great poetic achievement—we are distinctly told "the poetry does not matter"—but a prelude to more consecrated and religious living in the old age the poet looks forward to. It is also an attempt to create and achieve a new and valid kind: a "musically" organized longer poem. The inconsistency between the subject and form explains some of the weaker passages of poetry and may explain some weaknesses of conception. For if the poetry "does not matter," why devote full care to it? One can think of answers to the question, such as that the poetry does not matter relative to the religious life, but in its own lesser order matters a great deal. Perhaps so. But the situation is odd, since the poem is *about* a man's desire to achieve a valid spiritual life outside of the poetry. The subject tends to undercut the performance, even if not so murderously as in Stevens' poem.

The most patent example of the inconsistency appears in *East Coker*, section II. As soon as the introductory lyric is over, the poet tells us (rightly) that the lyric was feeble and adds that the poetry does not matter. Which raises very sharply the question of how much of such behavior a poem will stand. The *Quartets* have to bear a sizable load of feeble, lax, prolix verse and imagery.

But, before looking at other particulars and meanings, I wish to look at the form and its idea.

Critics agree that the poem is not a strict imitation of the quartet form, rather a loose emulation. Two of the most important differences are, first, that a quartet has no thematic unity, while each of the four quartets attempts thematic unity (which explains the presence of the fifth section); and, second, that "theme" means something quite different in music and poetry: in music it is a reiterated and varied melody, an organization of musical ideas; in poetry it must be an abstract idea or complex of abstract ideas about experience and in historical fact (and in the Quartets) usually a complex of moral ideas.

Poets are free to emulate; emulation is free to transform. A writer certainly may borrow musical patterns or ideas and apply them by analogy, however far he wants to stretch the analogy. The test will be, of course, what poetic power and unity result.

Eliot has several things in mind. He writes in *The Music of Poetry*: "There are possibilities for verse which bear some analogy to the development of a theme by different groups of instruments; there are possibilities of transition in a poem comparable to the different movements of a symphony or a quartet; there are possibilities of contrapuntal arrangement of subject-matter."<sup>11</sup>

The last and most important of these possibilities means the reiteration, contrast, or resolution of ideas. For this, one does not need to go to music, because such is the primary technique of the associative lyric, though the musical analogy might encourage very bold repetitions and circlings of the subject. What Eliot means by "transition" is not quite clear to me; presumably it would include the shifting of verse forms within a poem, also the shifting from tone to tone. The first possibility suggests, according to Grover Smith, the numerous levels of diction employed in the Quartets, from the discursively prosaic to the "metaphysically lyrical."<sup>12</sup> All

three of these analogies are employed extensively in the Quartets, and combined with liturgical, Biblical, and homiletical motifs.

The outward form is clear, and pretty much the same for the four. Five sections make up each quartet. The fundamental feeling of unity comes from the fact that, in each, certain themes, raised in the first section, questioned and lingered over in variation throughout the first four sections, reach some kind of at least apparent resolution in the fifth section. The first section states a theme, or a complex of notions, then develops it. The first part of the section (to use the musical term, the statement) is general, abstract; in the second part (the development) the theme is handled more actively and dramatically. The second section consists of a metrically formal poem followed by a prose or near-prose commentary on the poem. The third develops the ideas of the first two; its shape is different in different quartets. The fourth section is a short, formal lyric. The fifth section recapitulates and resolves. And the four quartets make up one poem, in at least the sense that the chief theme moves through them all, and the final resolving passage of the fourth, *Little Gidding*, takes us back to the beginning of the first, *Burnt Norton*, the "remembered gate."

One comes away from the Quartets with a sense of richness greater than that offered by any part. Much of the writing is, line by line, comparatively thin. The effect of richness comes, largely, from the "melody" of ideas, the working around, the dwelling on, the return to certain themes and images. This effect bears a real analogy, I believe, to musical effects. But music does this sort of thing much more powerfully, and with a far greater technical coherence. And the procedure is radically unsatisfactory as meaning, and as poetic coherence. There is not the coherence of logical argument, or narrative, or dramatic progression, or of the

clear, rich working-out of a thematic pattern as in the best English odes. The ambiguity, dissolution, and partial submergence of ideas is considerable; and while such a melting down of meaning might please a critic who wants ideas to be converted to "pure poetry," it is not good enough for a serious Christian writing a poem whose ideas he wishes to be taken very seriously. The contrast with Dante is instructive: in Dante there is every kind of coherence, narrative, metrical, philosophical. Or if it seems unfair to make a comparison out of the range of Eliot's ambition, Vaughan's *The World*, a meditative lyric written by a genuine mystic, serves clearly. Vaughan's poem is more lucid, more rational, more powerful, and more profound as expression of religious feeling.

In a partial sense, Eliot's poem works like Crane's *The Bridge*: it seeks to join eternity and time through condensed images. The difference is that Eliot has a much more informed sense of the difficulties of the journey, of the separation of time and eternity. Yet the resolution of the poem is like that of Crane's: the poem focuses meanings in a large image and thus makes one out of many. The conclusion is not mystical, though it looks forward to a mystical resolution; it is not quite rational, because, as the poem makes clear, the resolution has not yet been earned or reached by the protagonist either philosophically or mystically; we have only his hope of union. The poem reaches, imperfectly I feel, a kind of emotional unification of its various materials, an emotional unity (delight) that begs the question of instruction and hides the fragmentary nature of the poem, the merely associative linking of part to part. Where large meanings are at stake, quasi-musical organization is not good enough.

The poem has two related subjects, and many lesser motifs float in and out of the meditation of the protagonist.



One subject is the relation of time and eternity. What is mostly said about the relation is that eternity is the more real, that time without eternity is meaningless, that their relationships are obscure and perplexing; that mystical vision (the negative way is stressed), and it alone, leads to real understanding. Further, within time, epiphanies occur, highly concentrated movements of meaningful experience, which adumbrate mystical experience and which provide a means of partial understanding of reality to a religious man like the protagonist who is not a mystic. They are, by analogy, lesser Incarnations.

The second subject is the protagonist himself. He is a man in his middle years, a thoughtful, religious, weary, successful, disappointed man much concerned with the vanity and complexity of life, who looks forward to an old age in which he hopes he shall enter more deeply into a life consecrated to God and thus reconcile and unify his life. He is conscious that such unity cannot be merely within the individual soul; rather it must be involved in all of life: man's primitive beginnings as well as the conscious mind and past of the individual, the "sea's throat" and the "illegible stone" as well as the "secluded chapel" and the "children in the apple-tree."

The first subject is handled variously, at times with great poignance and beauty. Devotional meditation is one of the best, and most reasonable, subjects for poetry. Yet there are flaws. Christ and the historical church, in fact history and God's Providence through history, have very little place. What matters is only individual experiences of the supreme Union which redeems history outside of history. The only real use of history is to deny it in favor of the reconciling vision: "to apprehend/ The point of intersection of the timeless/ With time." This is a religious attitude, and one that can be expressed with great dignity and beauty;



but it is a curious attitude for a professing Catholic who is concerned with the church's future, for the author of *The Idea of a Christian Society*, to take. And the temptation of such an attitude is to reject most human experience without trying to understand it. As a matter of fact, Eliot knows this quite well; but that does not mean that the temptation does not affect the poem. Vaughan's *The World* shows a greater understanding of the normal claims of life, though it rejects them. One can reply that Eliot is expressing one kind of religious life, involved with personal experience, not a full view of all religion. True enough, but there is still a problem. First, the poem does not simply fail to speak about certain historical possibilities and involvements of religion: it flatly rejects them as unimportant. The fundamental idea that the past is *past* and consequently to be dismissed, appears very plainly in *Little Gidding*, II and III. Such an idea is a blunt rejection of Eliot's thought about tradition over several decades. Second, there is something strange in the double fact that a poem is largely about the Negative Way of St. John of the Cross *and* achieves reconciliation when the poet does not claim to be a mystic: he specifically denies that he is. The poetic reconciliation which does take place obscures the fact that a mystical union has not taken place. There is some jumbling and discord here of the poetic and religious, a discord at variance with the discord I earlier spoke of. The poetry does not matter, and the mysticism does; but it is the poetry, not the mysticism, that reconciles.

Further, and worse, the floating associative technique damages the poem as devotional meditation in another way. The meditation lacks both the firm rational ordonnance and the kind and intensity of passion one finds in St. Augustine, St. John of the Cross, or Pascal. A simple glance through the headings of St. John's *The Dark Night of the Soul* reveals a very lucid and vigorously masculine mind at

work, that knows precisely where it would go and moves by persuasive argument.

Eliot does accept the past insofar as it contains "timeless moments" and insofar as past souls join in prayer one who prays in the fire of acceptance. One might say that he asserts a mystical traditionalism. In other ways though he flatly denies the past, as meaningful inheritance and continuance. And that denial has some real poetic consequences which affect the metrical and other techniques in the poem. The advice the master brings back from the Dead (in a very exciting and successful passage dramatically) is plain in sense and offered flatly:

I am not eager to rehearse  
My thoughts and theory which you have forgotten.  
These things have served their purpose; let them be.  
So with your own, and pray they be forgiven  
By others, as I pray you to forgive  
Both bad and good. Last season's fruit is eaten  
And the fullfed beast shall kick the empty pail.  
For last year's words belong to last year's language  
And next year's words await another voice.

The purpose of the Master's intrusion is to tell the poet how painful and dry an experience old age will be. It is grimly pessimistic speech except for the last two lines which extend a religious hope. In this context, there is a justification for the lines I have quoted: they can be taken as an injunction to humility to a man facing death, which tries all men's work and makes it appear as (relatively) vanity. But the lines say more than that, *and* Eliot is not putting poetry aside to face the finalities of age and death. He is writing a poem. For the practicing poet, such advice is very bad indeed. Eliot does not of course really obey it. The continuity, in style and subject, of the Four Quartets with

his other work is considerable. And, with respect to the works of others, the Quartets are emulative to the point of eclecticism (though less so than *The Waste Land*). But, taken seriously, such sentiments would not allow the poet to quote St. John of the Cross, or for that matter use the English language. "The fullfed beast shall kick the empty pail." He may; but the food that he has eaten has been eaten and becomes and stays his substance. Nor does Eliot merely mean that the poet and man puts aside forms that have lost their life (to use a popular, densely obscure metaphor). Nor is he simply expressing our freedom to change our minds, to reject some past opinions and techniques, to grow and change. He rejects the substance: his Master tells him to put aside both bad and *good* poetic theory! Not because he is putting aside poetry for something greater, but because "next year" requires another, brand-new voice. That is a piece of bad poetic theory he is not asked to put aside.

Elsewhere in the poem he expresses disapproval of "disowning the past." In *The Dry Salvages*, II, he writes:

It seems, as one becomes older,  
That the past has another pattern, and ceases to be a mere  
sequence—  
Or even development: the latter a partial fallacy,  
Encouraged by superficial notions of evolution,  
Which becomes, in the popular mind, a means of disowning  
the past.

This is a shrewd, if irrelevant, gibe at certain liberal and progressivist attitudes, and would apparently preclude his view of the past elsewhere in the poem. But the meaningful past turns out to be not meaningful tradition in poetry, ethics, politics, but certain timeless moments of happiness which suggest the possibility of a religious re-

conciliation of our experience. He, just as much as the "popular mind" or the most extreme Marxist, disowns the past in the sense of meaningful tradition, the past he was so concerned for in "Tradition and the Individual Talent." The past, as phenomenon and as history, is irrecoverably dead, and history is void of meaning.

This view is a corollary of tendencies in the religious thought, the mysticism that empties history of meaning. Its literary corollary is a denial of the ideal of emulation and of literary continuity. Of course, as I have argued earlier, such a denial is impossible in practice, but the denial in theory can lead to harmful rather than healthy objects and methods of emulation.

I am not sure what is cause and what effect, but this denial is consonant with the attitude taken toward metrical convention in the poem, the very free "free verse" that is the mainstay of the poem. A lack of respect for metrical tradition can also account for the glib facility of most of the formal lyrics. But Eliot has over the years written very little in the more traditional meters and forms, so neither the free verse nor the formal lyrics have to be explained by his about-face in ideas of poetic tradition.

Metrically, the poem is largely prose (one may call some of the prose extremely loose accentual verse, but one can call any mildly rhythmical prose that), with some free verse, and some more formal lyrics, the last usually in fixed positions (II and IV of each Quartet). There is no reason why good poetry cannot be in prose: *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed* and the King James version of the Psalms are technically prose and are great poetry. To sacrifice verse is to sacrifice a power, though, and something must do the work. The passion of asseveration, varied kinds of repetition of words and ideas, richness and density of imagery and connotation—all help make prose poetry rich.

So it is here, but less so than in the best Whitman or in the Psalms. The poem's penchant for discursive conversational prose is a weakness that has been commented on more than once by critics. Eliot's feeling, expressed in the passage from "The Music of Poetry" discussed earlier, that a mixing of prosaic prose with various kinds and intensities of verse will make for a richer orchestration than verse alone can achieve, leads to a fundamental error of convention in the poem. Despite the musical analogy on which Eliot heavily banks, the prose too often stays prosy.

There is a very great proportion of commentary in the poem. So is there in *Paradise Lost* and *The Divine Comedy*, but in those poems it is subsumed under, and illuminates, action. Here the commentary and the "timeless moments," the little epiphanies, combine with some lyric poetry and some moments of fragmentary action, to *make* what action there is in the poem, the action of a mind moving over possibilities for old age and for mysticism. This is both a structural flaw and a detriment to sustained poetic intensity, but it has its virtues too.

In the first place, the commentary is very good, and, in the second place, it is expressed in a very graceful and well-modulated prose. An honest man surveys some experience, and surveys it very intelligently. Or at least expresses it in a prose that speaks with the authority of intelligence. The tone of Eliot's prose can almost victimize the mind of the reader: it always *sounds* so precise and thoughtful. Luckily, it usually is. One of the most moving things in the poem is the self-revelation, the expression in a grimly calm prose of the difficulties and pains of reaching middle age. So is the call to be courageous and consecrated in age, to move into a new and deeper life. These are subjects well worth the expression. Yet the prose has its propriety considerably jarred at times by the intrusion of very "poetic," facilely



inclusive images (for instance at the close of *East Coker*, 11).

One cannot draw any theoretical and narrow line between free verse and prose poetry, though one can say that free verse hovers somewhat nearer to a measurable base, normally and perhaps always accentual. The shades of degree are many. But the terms are handy and point a real difference, the difference in tone and assumption of feeling between "That was a way of putting it—not very satisfactory" and "Other echoes/ Inhabit the garden. Shall we follow? / Quick, said the bird, find them, find them, / Round the corner." For poetry to be genuinely free verse, some real, metrically obscure, and continuing rhythm must be present. Extending this definition, one finds that parts of the King James Psalms and Whitman become free verse instead of prose poetry, but I am after usable rather than neatly exclusive terms.

Free verse, especially the short-lined variety, is such a difficult and tenuous form that it is probably a bad choice as a major feature of a longer poem. It breaks down or slides over into facile rhythms entirely too easily. Blank verse is more flexible, more comprehensive in emotional articulation, and far more easily sustained. Eliot's free verse has always been uneven, and it is in the Four Quartets. His awareness (however conscious) of that fact may, as much as musical analogies, have led him to interlace the free verse with a stabilizing prose. I shall examine the method rather closely in *Burnt Norton*, 1, where it is at its most successful.

Time present and time past  
Are both perhaps present in time future  
And time future contained in time past.  
If all time is eternally present  
All time is unredeemable.  
What might have been is an abstraction  
Remaining a perpetual possibility



Only in a world of speculation.  
What might have been and what has been  
Point to one end, which is always present.  
Footfalls echo in the memory  
Down the passage which we did not take  
Toward the door we never opened  
Into the rose-garden. My words echo  
Thus, in your mind.

But to what purpose  
Disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose leaves  
I do not know.

Other echoes  
Inhabit the garden. Shall we follow?  
Quick, said the bird, find them, find them,  
Round the corner. . . .

The free verse continues with the pursuit of the echoes (assuming "them" refers to the echoes) into the garden, the discovery of illusory water in an empty concrete pool, the birds' excited chatter and message. The section ends with these lines:

Go, go, *gó*, said the *bírd*: *húman* kind  
Cánnót *béar* very much *réality*.  
Tíme *pást* and tíme *fúture*  
Whát *míght*/have *béen*/and whát/*hás* *béen*/  
Póint *tó*/*one* *énd*,/which *is* *álways* *présént*.

The scansion of the entire section gives us three to four heavy accents, three predominating, as the norm, with only distinctly heavy accents being counted. That is, what would be stressed in accentual-syllabic verse by the principle of relative stress is not necessarily stressed here. One gets, as is common in free-verse scansion, a number of ambiguous lines, where the choice is between three and four accents.

Móving without p'essure, over the déad leaves,  
 In the aútumn héat, through the víbrant air,  
 And the bírd called, in respónse to  
 The únheard music hídden in the shrúbbery,  
 And the únseen eyebeams crossed, for the róses  
 Had the lóok of flówers that are lóoked at.

This marking, which may appear unnatural, seems to me to catch the really strong accents and the odd cadency. But several of these lines can easily, perhaps more naturally, be given four stresses.

The more prosaic parts that begin and end the section scan as easily as the more lyrical parts. But one can arrange any prose into groups with three or four accents. Something else, and something subtler is at work. The first five lines of the section and the last two are prose in cadency, typical feeling, diction. The middle part (from "Other echoes" on) is a very lyrical free verse and as lovely as anything Eliot has written. The modulation from the prose to the verse and back again is very skillful. After the first five lines, which are abstract, discursive prose, comes a modulation towards verse.

What míght have béen is<sup>x</sup> an<sup>x</sup> abstrac<sup>x</sup>tion<sup>x</sup>  
 Remáining a perpétuál possí<sup>xx</sup>bility<sup>x</sup>  
 Ónly in a wórld of<sup>x</sup> spéculation<sup>xx</sup>.

By the informal marking I simply wish to indicate the pressure of cadency. The double mark shows the most significant (not necessarily the strongest) stress in each line. The substance is still prose, an abstract semi-philosophic prose. The triple stress in each line, the multiple unstressed syllables before the most significant stress, and the unac-

cented syllable after the most significant stress help to impose a rhythm, almost a mechanical rhythm, on the prosaic substance. Then come these lines.

Whát mǐght/háve béeñ/and whát/hás béeñ  
Póint tǒ/óñe end,/wǐch ǐs ál/wáys préseñt.

These two lines scan as iambic tetrameter (with two not unusual substitutions and with a feminine ending in the second line). The meaning is still abstract, but the language has been cleared of the philosophical diction. The language is simple, devoid of distinct imagery. The next lines are more poetic in rhythm and imagery.

Fóotfálls/écho/in<sup>†</sup> the/mémory/  
Down the pássage wǐch wě díd nǒt táke  
Towards the dóor wě névēr ópenēd  
Into the róse-gárdēñ. Mý wórds echo  
Thús, ín/ýour mínd./  
                                    Bút tǒ/whát púrpose  
Distúrb/íñg the dúst/ón ā bówl/óf róse/leáves  
Í dó/nǒt kñow./

The substance is now imagistic, perceptual, personal rather than abstract. The first line, in a falling rhythm faintly imitative of the action, leads from the two metrically regular preceding lines through three lines that echo something of the cadency of the three philosophical lines marked with double stress marks (many light syllables run to a significant syllable near the end of the line). Then the rhythm turns into a more nearly regular rising rhythm, the two half-lines balancing each other and providing a semi-close, then a close. The way has been beautifully prepared

for the freshly lovely free verse that follows. The section is the best example of a "musical" transition in the poem.

I shall not linger over the meaning of the section, except to say that it is rich, containing the essential themes of the whole poem: the puzzling relations between abstraction and experience, time and eternity, childhood and maturity, illusion and reality. The themes are developed musically in the rest of the poem, a procedure whose defects and virtues I have discussed. As a dramatic bit, the passage both suffers and profits from its use of what Yvor Winters would call implicit plot. It suffers in clarity and coherence, gains in suggestiveness. The propriety of using implicit plot is that Eliot is attempting to catch and suggest evanescent and fugitive, yet deeply felt, shades of emotions and experience: our lack of knowledge adds to the glimmering presence of mystery. This is, to be sure, a dangerous method; it succeeds here. Who is the "we"? I guess, partly from analogies in some of Eliot's other work, particularly *Landscapes* and *The Family Reunion*, that the "we" is the poet and a real or imagined friend, perhaps a sister or girl cousin, with whom he shared some innocently happy childhood experiences. Be that as it may, the total lack of formal reference to "we" and "your" is an ambiguous virtue that suggests flaws of construction in the poem.

The formal lyrics are, with two exceptions, poor. The two exceptions are significantly in free verse. No lyric in conventional verse is very successful. The first lyric in the poem, which is in *Burnt Norton*, II, attempts a huge subject, the providential reconciliation of all experience, in brief compass, and fails badly. The first, much quoted image, "Garlic and sapphires in the mud / Clot the bedded axle-tree," certainly strikes, but why should it not? Since the image stands simply for the diversity and mixture of things in human experience, Eliot had the whole world to pick

from. In the third line of that lyric, "wire" is treated as two syllables, the crudest sort of amateurish mistake in metrics.<sup>13</sup> The rest of the poem is facile in imagery (because of the inclusive theme, any imagery of motion will serve) and very stiff metrically. Eliot attempts a dance-like effect which imitates the providential "dance," but the dancers are uncoiled machines, not people. The tight metrical patterning with the first stressed syllable of the line being given especially strong prominence in nine straight lines, is entirely too rigid.

The fourth section of *Burnt Norton* is one of the exceptions, a very beautiful and sensitive little poem about an epiphany, a moment's contemplation of nature in which appear flashes of the supernatural. The poem moves from rising tetrameter to free verse and back again.

The first lyric in *East Coker*, II, is fustian, as Eliot promptly informs us as soon as the poem is over. The second lyric, in IV, is highly impressive in idea, but extremely facile and mechanical in sound and in imagery. The fourth stanza reads like a parody of Eliot's whole method in the poem, a crudely overdone parody at that, doggerel in rhythm.

The chill ascends from feet to knees,  
The fever sings in mental wires.  
If to be warmed, then I must freeze  
And quake in frigid purgatorial fires  
Of which the flame is roses, and the smoke is briars.

There is a modified sestina in *The Dry Salvages*, II. It has six stanzas, each with an *abcdef* scheme of word-endings, each word-ending rhyming with the word-endings in the corresponding lines of all stanzas, the word-endings in the sixth stanza being identical with those of the first. Like most sestinas, it is at best a virtuoso piece. Section IV of *The Dry Salvages* is a moving invocation to the Virgin. The two lyrics in *Little Gidding* suffer from mechanical meters.

The best commentary on the poem is Eliot's own, accidental one. In *The Dry Salvages*, v, he contrasts "most of us" with the saints.

For most of us, there is only the unattended  
Moment, the moment in and out of time,  
The distracting fit, lost in a shaft of sunlight,  
The wild thyme unseen, or the winter lightning  
Or the waterfall, or music heard so deeply  
That it is not heard at all, but you are the music  
While the music lasts. These are only hints and guesses,  
Hints followed by guesses, and the rest  
Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action.

The poem provides "hints followed by guesses," epiphanies followed by commentary, sometimes affecting hints and deeply intelligent commentary. It provides a little prayer and a good deal of thought. It does not provide the discipline and action, the formal coherence, a long poem needs. The musical technique leads to an illusion of coherence, but, when one compares the Quartets to the great poems of the past, the illusion outweighs the coherence. And the loss is serious. The method of the associative lyric is not good enough for the long poem.

What is good enough for the long poem? I blush to say it. Narrative. Not just narrative, to be sure, but narrative complicated, thought upon, rhetorically deepened and heightened, thematically unified, fed by great invention and imagination. The telling of sustained, meaningful human action in substantially chronological order. That is a central feature of *every* great long poem of the past, including poetic drama. Modern attempts to evade it, or fudge it, have not worked. That is to say, they have not properly imitated human nature (which is purposive and active as well as meditative), they have inadequately delighted and instructed. Neither have modern attempts in Britain and



America to fulfill it, worked. E. A. Robinson's characters in his longer poems suffer from romantic somnambulism: they drift, dazed, through action rather than act. Robinson Jeffers' longer poems suffer from bad writing and a philosophy that makes meaningful action impossible. Robert Frost is, in my judgment, the best American poet of the century. Many of his short poems are distinguished; some are superb. But his medium-sized narratives tend to be oppressively cute or sentimental; and his masques are not really narrative and have other faults, including over-precious writing and radical incoherence of thought. Archibald MacLeish's *Conquistador* is really an extended lyric. I have not read enough of Stephen Vincent Benet's longer poems to be entitled to an opinion.

Of course, to say it again, one has to start from where he is. One cannot manufacture a tradition. Poets work within the genres available to them; but, in so doing, they reforge the forms. The two most important movements toward the long poem have come, first, in the drama; and, second, through the meditative lyric to narrative. Christopher Frye, T. S. Eliot, and Archibald MacLeish, whatever the flaws of their plays (and those flaws seem to me serious), have had the wit to work in a tradition very much alive and bring it toward poetry. Allen Tate's *The Swimmers*, conceived as part of a long, symbolic, meditative, autobiographical poem, finds a proper subject in an incident, whether real or imagined, of the poet's boyhood, an incident which has a certain scope and completeness and intense moral, social, and religious implications. In the poem, some young boys witness the prelude and aftermath of a lynching. The narrative structure gives a clarity, urgency, and wholeness to a poem that is brilliantly executed, variously symbolic, and that emulates with success writers as diverse as William Faulkner (subject and narrative details), Wordsworth (the

autobiographical kind), and Dante (terza rima). He takes the meditative lyric toward narrative and toward length. Karl Shapiro's *Adam and Eve*, though intellectually thin (at least compared to Milton, whom he emulates), is a narrative rich in poetical resources and often hauntingly beautiful. And Louis Simpson's *The Runner* is, in its unambitious way, a sound and moving narrative.

The long poem has been much abused and often ignored; it is not dead. It can have a great future. Such a future can come only if the poets who would make it recognize the essential proprieties of the longer kinds and emulate wisely. These two causes are not sufficient; but they are necessary.

# 7

## *Conclusion*

**B**Y DIRECT ARGUMENT and application, I have defended in this book several concepts of literary criticism: specifically, propriety, emulation, the universal, probability, delight and instruction, fancy and judgment, the genres. Other concepts have been attacked, directly or by implication: among others, relativism, Coleridgean Imagination, organic form, the abolition of the genres.

My sub-title, "An Argument for Propriety," names the thread. Propriety links the other notions and (in my formal intent, however well or badly achieved) ties together the discourse of the book.

In the first chapter, I argued for the validity of the ideas I defend. In this chapter I shall undertake a different exploration and a more basic defense of them, centering on the idea of propriety.

Let us turn to three, parallel, compatible, not quite identical formulations of the ideal of the good poem I have offered:<sup>1</sup> Dryden's idea that a good poem should be "a just and lively image of nature . . . for the delight and instruction of mankind"; Dennis's statement that "poetry . . . is an

art, by which a poet excites passion . . . in order to satisfy and improve, to delight and to reform the mind"; my own, more clumsily phrased definition of the good poem as "a proper image of nature, emulatively heedful of genre."

All three assume that poets write poems on purpose, for an audience, and about human experience. All assume the reality of value, the (partial) intelligibility of experience, the possibility of (some) genuine communication. All assume that emotions can be related to thought and to experience; that some emotional responses are better, more proper, than others; that it is good to know and achieve as much reality as possible.

These assumptions are not very startling. Every one makes all of them (except the specific ones about poetry) every day, all day. Without them, we would not say "Good morning," give change, or buy apples. They are permanent and universal assumptions (that is, permanently and universally assumed). If there were no possibility of communication, we would have no reason to talk; no possibility of intelligibility, no reason for asking questions; no real value, no reason for doing, saying, or being anything. (In the economy of the human spirit, even sexual lust and lust for power approach their objects as a good and assume the reality of the objects.) These facts strike me as an argument for the truth of the assumptions that is overwhelming, however naive or unphilosophical it may seem to be.

Further, people always, in a very basic way, seek reality and shun illusion. No exceptions. The immediately obvious apparent exceptions are rationalization and delusion. They prove the point. For what do people do when they rationalize? They deceive themselves into thinking that something which is unreal is real. If they did not seek reality, they would not rationalize. Take an example, gossip. People fancy that they talk about other people's faults out of moral

concern; really they only too often talk about them out of morbid and envious delight in evil (many strange mixtures of motive are here possible). Or a rationalization may be about a "matter of fact," in which case it produces one kind of delusion. Take an example where there will be little disagreement (on many subjects there is, of course, very important disagreement about what is or is not illusory); the tragic psychosis of a mother who goes on expecting a son home from a war after she has received an official report that he has been killed in action.<sup>2</sup> She convinces herself that the unreal is real, the real unreal. She *seeks* reality and shuns illusion. She does not, in fact, find reality; but reality is her standard as much as it is the standard of the psychiatrist who tries to cure her. All people seek the real and seek to achieve a proper response to it. Knowing what is real and achieving a proper response to it can be very difficult, in life and in literary criticism.

Now, a curious thing. Some theories deny the assumptions of which I have been speaking. Both literary and other theories. They deny the reality of value, the possibility of communication, the intelligibility of experience, the possibility of rationally relating motive and belief, action and feeling, to reality. Sometimes the arguments they offer may be impressive. *But* people who formally deny these assumptions go right on making them: they talk; they argue; they try to convince; they try to show that other theories accord with reality less well than theirs. That is, not so much in theory as in practical fact, such theorists always and persistently contradict themselves. A book could be written—a book needs to be written—on various forms of such thinking.<sup>3</sup> It might turn out to be, I fear, if I tried to write it, a much more angrily polemical book than this one.

Let us take a single example of such thinking outside of literary criticism. Virginia P. Held in an excellent article

about juvenile delinquency in an American national magazine quotes, with intelligent disapproval and the charity to leave the speaker anonymous, a high official dealing with juvenile delinquency as saying, "All behavior, even the most seemingly reprehensible, serves some need of the individual, and it isn't for us to judge it." It is frightening to live in an intellectual climate where one has to *explain* what is wrong with such a statement. The statement says two things. First, since all moral standards are imposed and cultural (i.e., unreal) and psychological needs are real, one should reject moral standards in favor of full permissiveness of behavior. But that is a moral argument, based on a knowledge of what is real, and as such flatly self-contradictory. Second, the statement implies that no moral judgment is possible and that it is therefore immoral to make any moral judgment. A second full-fledged self-contradiction. And the two self-contradictions contradict each other. Note that the high official, like all people, referred his moral judgment to his notion of what is most real. This sort of muddle is precisely what one gets when one denies the nexus of propriety, the possibility of just and rational action and motive. It is highly typical of much modern thought. The results are not only intellectual muddles, but quite a few other things, some of them very ugly.

One of them, to bring the argument back to its relevance to this book, is bad poetry and bad criticism.

Now, if arguments that deny the assumptions of which I have been speaking are self-destructive; and they flatly are; and if the concepts I support follow from or are basically consonant with those assumptions whereas opposing concepts defect from those assumptions, the contention of this book will be difficult to refuse.

Let us look at some links. First at Dryden's definition of a good poem as a "just and lively image of nature."



Nature (reality) is the subject and the standard of the phrase. The concept "imitation" is included in the word "image," but it is also checked by that word. The temptation of imitative theory is to ignore the fact that an art work is a construct, a something-in-itself, as well as being "about" something. An image is a construct as well as a representation. At the same time, the stress is on the imitation, the meaning of the poem. That this is a sound emphasis is shown by the fact that when people argue that poetry is not representative but something else, they also usually manage to let us know, often in the teeth of their theories, what it is that poetry represents: the organic biological essence of life (Susanne Langer); God by analogy and intuition (Wallace Fowlie); the only possible moral good by being an imposed creation of value (I. A. Richards); the mobile flow of free personality (Herbert Read); the poet's soul (many); Jungian archetypal structuring (Elizabeth Drew); the "tough" ambiguous uncertainty of life (Cleanth Brooks); the unconscious (surrealism); and so on. All such theories support the mimetic theory by telling to what reality poetry corresponds. The sense of reality in most of such theories is narrow compared to Dryden's "nature." In Dryden's theory, poetry is about all of reality (God, supernatural, physical nature, man) and justly corresponds to that reality.

The "just" and "lively" define what sort of propriety should obtain. They are lively and strong terms and meet each other in curious ways. Just includes the idea of probable, verisimilar, and also includes the moral meaning of just: a good poem is a valid moral evaluation of the reality it speaks of. It also includes the idea of just feeling: a poem is a proper response of attitude to its full subject. I trust some of the discussions in this book will show that subject is not the contemptuously obvious thing it is sometimes

taken to be. The lively means delightful. A poem that does not delight, fails. One can argue that a poem which does in fact delight a good judge must be a proper imitation of its subject. This kind of argument is a highly valuable corrective to a too facile application of rules, just as rules provide a valuable corrective to untutored emotional response. What fits the rules should delight a good judge; what delights a good judge must, in some real way, fit the rules. Such a give-and-take offers a huge and rational freedom unavailable to other theories of poetry. Lively can also mean "life-like," and here overlaps just in the sense of verisimilar. Lively also means vital, full of passionate life. Which good poetry is.

In Dennis's phrase, the poet's intent is made plain. He excites passion *in order to* satisfy and improve the mind. The phrase reminds us that poetry is a deliberate activity of a reasonable and purposive, decision-making being. It does not exclude the depths or the mystery that live in the making of poetry and in the poem itself. It does insist that poets do write poems on purpose (a fact which does instantly away with a great deal of poetic theorizing) and that the activity is dignified and worth the labor *because* (once more) a proper response of emotion to reality is possible. Imagination should be mighty; judgment—the rational, conscious being—is master.

My own formulation, stolen from Dennis and Dryden, adds a subsidiary truth which they both knew well: that poets learn from other poets and work in living forms. The propriety of this behavior I have argued, by precept and example, in all the discussions of individual poems. However convincing my examples may have been, the reality of emulation, the fact that good poets use and remake the forms, ideas, language of earlier poets, is proved by, and the reasonable ground for, literary history.

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*CONCLUSION*

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Propriety, then, is the most central and indefeasible of literary concepts. It appears covertly where it is suppressed. It is best, in poetry and criticism, to admit it and use it and the true ideas that cluster around it, openly. The stakes are high. Civilization is worth the trouble.

# Notes

## Chapter 1

1. The phrase is Norman Maclean's in his excellent essay, "From Action to Image: Theories of the Lyric in the Eighteenth Century," *Critics and Criticism*, ed. R. S. Crane (University of Chicago, 1952), p. 411.

2. Witness Northrop Frye in *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton University, 1957), pp. 247-48: "The purpose of criticism by genres is . . . to clarify . . . traditions and affinities, *thereby bringing out a large number of literary relationships that would not be noticed as long as there were no context established for them.*" The emphasis is mine.

3. See Rosemond Tuve, *Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery* (University of Chicago, 1947), p. 234.

4. See the unpubl. diss. (University of Minnesota, 1951) by Lillian Feder, "John Dryden's Interpretation and Use of Latin Poetry and Rhetoric," pp. 47-66; F. L. Huntley, *On Dryden's Essay of Dramatic Poesy* (University of Michigan, 1951), pp. 13-17 and elsewhere; Samuel Holt Monk's review of Huntley's monograph in *Philological Quarterly*, XXXI (1952), 269-70.

5. Neo-classical theory has its differences as to what the imitation is about. Aristotle insists that dramatic poetry is mainly imitation of action. Dryden holds that the "soul of [dramatic] Poesy" is "imitation of humour [individual characteristics] and passions [the common feelings of mankind]." *Essays of John Dryden*, ed. W. P. Ker (Oxford University, 1900), I, 68.

6. *Poetics*, Chapter 4 [1448b] (trans. Ingram Bywater).
7. See Samuel Holt Monk, "A Grace Beyond the Reach of Art," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, V (1944), 131-50.
8. 1449b.
9. See Hoyt Trowbridge, "The Place of Rules in Dryden's Criticism," *Modern Philology*, XLIV (1946), 84-96.
10. *Rhetoric*, Book 2, Chapter 10 [1388a] (trans. W. R. Roberts).
11. Conformity to non-conformism, of late a joke even in popular magazines, has been an intellectual scandal for a long time.
12. Thomas Rymer, "A Short View of Tragedy," *The Critical Works of Thomas Rymer*, ed. C. A. Zimansky (Yale University, 1956), pp. 131-75.
13. "Vast difference will it make, whether a god be speaking or a hero, a ripe old man or one still in the flower and fervour of youth, a dame of rank or a bustling nurse, a roaming trader or the tiller of a verdant field, a Colchian or an Assyrian, one bred at Thebes or at Argos." vv. 114-18 (trans. H. R. Fairclough).
14. Dryden's *Essays*, I, 47-48.
15. Here are several. T. S. Eliot, *Gerontion*, the part beginning "History has many passages"; W. C. Williams, "It's a strange courage/ you give me, ancient star:/ Shine alone in the sunrise/ toward which you lend no part!"; Ezra Pound, "lord of his work and master of utterance/ who turneth his word in its season and shapes it"; Wallace Stevens, "Among the dogs and dung./ One would continue to contend with one's ideas"; Allen Tate, "man can never be alone."; R. P. Warren, "In separateness does love learn definition"; W. H. Auden, "Those to whom evil is done/ Do evil in return"; Donald Hall, "Man lives by love, and not by metaphor."
16. Samuel Johnson, "Preface to Shakespeare," *The Great Critics*, ed. J. H. Smith and E. W. Parks, 3rd ed. (New York, 1951), p. 445.
17. *Loc. cit.*
18. As Sidney in a famous passage puts it, "Now for the poet, he nothing affirmeth, and therefore never lieth." *The Defense of Poesy*, ed. A. S. Cook (Boston, 1890), p. 35. In that passage he is defending poetry, by several inconsistent arguments, against certain common attacks. Elsewhere in the *Defense*, and in his own poetry, he takes truth in poetry, its "delightful teaching," very seriously.
19. Some theories are better than others. Perhaps the best is the medieval theory of the *integumentum* (the cover, or veil). Related to the theory of the multiple readings of Scripture, it can mean allegorical reading in a special sense, but it is not always merely that. Put briefly and simplified (for instance, the subject may be true), the theory is

that the poet invents his subject, the progress of events, but intends the moral and religious implications of the attitudes expressed to and through the subject. Boccaccio expresses the theory thus: Poetry "veils truth in a fair and fitting garment of fiction." *Boccaccio on Poetry*, ed. C. G. Osgood, 2nd ed. (New York, 1956), p. 39. See Osgood's note [p. 157] on the passage for a list of parallel medieval references.

20. Vv. 333-34: "Aut prodesse volunt aut delectare poetae/ aut simul et iucunda et idonea dicere vitae." The primary meaning of *idoneus* is "fit, proper." We are seldom far from the notion of propriety in neo-classical criticism.

21. Yvor Winters, as a critic and a poet, has been such an influence, but by rational argument and the dignity of personal authority, not by sweetening the pill. He sometimes dips the pill in vinegar.

22. "Milton," *Lives of the Poets* (Oxford University, 1905), I, 170.

23. This double, perfectly consistent stress explains away a considerable part of the much discussed inconsistency of Dryden.

24. "Miss Emily and the Bibliographer," *On the Limits of Poetry* (New York, 1948), p. 56.

25. Those included in *Critics and Criticism*.

26. They—specifically Olson and Keast—have also committed some considerable rudenesses of attack, queerly at variance with the lofty academic relativism they can adopt in which the Aristotelian is but one of several valid modes of criticism.

I am bothered even more by the large-scale view those critics can take of poetry as a "field," where jobs are envisioned for specialized academic and critical ants to scurry up and do. The final cause of poetry, it would seem, is elaborate scholarship. Is it for *that* we love poems?

27. "William Empson, Contemporary Criticism, and Poetic Diction," *Critics*, p. 67.

28. Langer and Croce, in very different ways, would subsume all poetry, regardless of genre, under delight.

29. e.g., *Critics*, pp. 17-18, 346, 566.

30. (Emphasis mine). Chapter 9 [1451].

## Chapter 2

1. *Coleridge's Shakespearean Criticism*, ed. T. M. Raysor (Harvard University, 1930), I, 220.

2. Dryden's use of the two terms is discussed in my thesis (University of Minnesota, 1956) "The Image of Nature in John Dryden," pp. 38-40.



3. "Alexander Pope," *Lives*, III, 222.
4. Some useful discussions are M. W. Bundy, *The Theory of Imagination in Classical and Mediaeval Thought*, in University of Illinois Studies in Language and Literature, No. 12 (1927); D. F. Bond, "The Neo-Classical Psychology of the Imagination," *English Literary History*, IV (1937), 245-64; C. D. Thorpe, *The Aesthetic Theory of Thomas Hobbes* (University of Michigan, 1940); M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp* (New York, 1953), esp. pp. 156-83.
5. As long as we do not read it into earlier discussions.
6. Dryden's *Essays*, I, 146.
7. Though people had not been blindly ignorant about such matters. See Dryden's *Essays*, I, 1.
8. "Preface to Eleonora," *The Poetical Works of Dryden*, ed. G. R. Noyes, 2nd ed. (Boston, 1950), p. 270.
9. Coleridge was, off and on, aware of this. His followers seldom are. Even in the famous passage (*Biographia Literaria*, end of Chapter 14, beginning "The poet, described in ideal perfection") that rhapsodizes the "synthetic and magical power" of Imagination, he writes that imagination is under the "irremissive, though gentle and unnoticed, controul" of the "will and understanding."
10. Cf. Bundy, *Theory of Imagination*, pp. 191, 201, 223, 273-75, and elsewhere.
11. Ed. Brewster Ghiselin (University of California, 1952).
12. *Biographia Literaria*, ed. J. Shawcross (Oxford University, 1907), II, 11.
13. See Yvor Winters, *In Defense of Reason* (University of Denver, 1947), pp. 30-36, 57-64.
14. *Biographia*, II, 63-65.
15. *Shakespearean Criticism*, I, 223.
16. Coleridge dismisses the artifact metaphor with scorn here, but uses it elsewhere (*ibid.*, II, 262-63).
17. *Ibid.*, I, 229.
18. Dryden's *Essays*, I, 36.
19. "The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry," *The Critical Works of John Dennis*, ed. E. N. Hooker, 2 vols. (Johns Hopkins University, 1939-43), I, 336 [I omit his capitals].

### Chapter 3

1. Austin Warren and René Wellek, *Theory of Literature* (New York, 1949), pp. 235-47; Frye, *Anatomy*, esp. pp. 243-337; Susanne K.

Langer, *Feeling and Form* (New York, 1953), esp. pp. 280-305. See also W. K. Wimsatt's and Cleanth Brooks's very shrewd comments on tragicomedy, *Literary Criticism* (New York, 1957), p. 163.

2. Cf. René Wellek, *A History of Modern Criticism: 1750-1950* (Yale University, 1955), II, 50.

3. "Coleridge's Conversational Poems," *Tulane Studies in English*, V (1955), 103-10, esp. 105.

4. *Aesthetic . . .*, trans. Douglas Ainslie, 2nd ed. (London, 1929), pp. 36-37.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

6. See Frank Kermode's *The Romantic Image* (London, 1957). Kermode sees the romantic concern with poetry as image to be near the center of romanticism.

7. As shown in a very good book, Donald Davie's *Articulate Energy*, 1st Am. ed. (New York, 1958). See esp. pp. 14-23, 85-95, 148, most especially this sentence (p. 148): "*What is common to all modern poetry is the assertion or the assumption (most often the latter) that syntax in poetry is wholly different from syntax as understood by logicians and grammarians.*" [Emphasis his]

8. Though I shall make an amateur stab in this note. All mental life, Croce says, is either intuition or cognition. Art is entirely intuition, intuition is entirely expression. Therefore it would follow that every work of art is entirely expression. But Croce inconsistently maintains that some expressions are successful, others failures. But if each work of art is entirely expression, there can be no "imperfect" or "deficient" expressions. The contradiction—which involves tergiversations on "intuition" and "expression"—is essential to Croce's theory. Admission of degrees of intuition would wreck his general theory. But he must allow degrees of intuition, known in part by thinking, cognition, in order to make any critical judgment of art possible. All theories which exclude serious and rational judgment sneak it back in somewhere.

9. At least in Great Britain and America. I have not enough knowledge to be entitled to a serious opinion of the longer poems of such European writers as René Char, St.-Jean Perse, and Nikos Kazantzakis, but I have, from what I have read in and of them, some unscholarly suspicions that their methods are fundamentally lyrical and disordered.

10. See Tuve, *Elizabethan Imagery*, p. 12 and note.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 233.

12. To say that all positions are "relative," or equally true, or true

for their holders or for certain cultures is to make historical and logical accommodation impossible. Tolerance is the narrowest of monisms.

13. See Tuve, *Elizabethan Imagery*, pp. 230-37.

14. The movies reverse the pattern: tragedy often concerns "poor folks having a hard time"; comedy shows "rich folks cutting up."

15. Wellek and Warren, *Theory*, p. 235.

16. See E. R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (New York, 1953), pp. 359-62.

## Chapter 4

1. There has been a good deal of scholarship on the relation of *Lycidas* to its historical genre. J. H. Hanford's "The Pastoral Elegy and Milton's *Lycidas*," *Publications Modern Language Association*, XXV (1910), 403-47, is an exciting and subtle piece of work. So is Rosemond Tuve's essay on *Images and Themes in Five Poems by Milton* (Harvard University, 1957). M. Y. Hughes' headnote to the poem in his edition of Milton (New York, 1947) summarizes quite a bit of the scholarship to which it is a valuable addition. Earlier examples of the kind are collected in *The Pastoral Elegy*, ed. T. P. Harrison, trans. H. J. Leon (University of Texas, 1939).

2. See Hughes' headnote, pp. 118-19 (section 8).

3. The "Oat" also "listens," one of the few, slight flaws in the poem.

4. *Images and Themes*, pp. 78-79.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 108 and note.

6. In Chapters 6 and 7.

7. Hughes' headnote, p. 117. He is raising an issue, not expressing an opinion.

8. Hughes informs us (p. 116) that the flower passage was an afterthought in the Trinity manuscript. It is not surprising that Milton should have added such a passage; it is surprising that he may have at any time felt the poem complete without it. Be that as it may, he did not long feel so.

9. This is relevant to a defense of the poem's unity against such considerations as those adduced by Hughes in sections 3 and 4 of his headnote (pp. 116-17).

10. *A Study of Literature* (Cornell University, 1948), p. 171.

11. For instance, E. M. W. Tillyard, *Milton* (London, 1930), pp. 80-85.

12. Except for "And with forc'd fingers rude," which is a deliberate

and imitative mess. One can scan it—by violence—as a pyrrhic, a spondee, and an iamb, which is a permissible variation, but that does not really catch the sound. The first two feet sound more like two garbled and uneven trochees.

13. The lack of that freedom is the most essential flaw of *The Faerie Queene*. The stanza is so long and invariable in frame that it becomes a firm unit of rhetoric and meaning. The shorter stanza of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* proves far more supple. It allows the forward motion of brisk narrative.

14. It actually is subordinate to and modifies the whole clause, but I follow the convention of assigning such modifiers to the verb.

15. See 1 above and Hughes' headnote for important references.

16. Particularly by M. C. Battestein, "John Crowe Ransom and *Lycidas*: A Reappraisal," *College English*, XVII (1956), 223-28. Battestein unquestionably scores some points.

## Chapter 5

1. For excellent studies of this genre and its history, see Norman Maclean's study in *Critics and Criticism* (pp. 408-60), mentioned in first chapter, note 1; G. N. Shuster, *The English Ode from Milton to Keats* (Columbia University, 1940), esp. pp. 93-145; and A. W. Verrall, *Lectures on Dryden*, ed. Margaret de G. Verrall (Cambridge University, 1914), pp. 176-216.

2. Shuster, *English Ode*, p. 251 and n. 21 (same page).

3. Whitman's *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed* is a beautiful poem, but one that stays near the ground-surge of one or two fundamental emotions.

4. This notion contradicts a standard view of Dryden as a cautious skeptic who accepted Rome in a spirit of timorous retreat. The evidence of his poetry and his argumentative prose is overwhelmingly against such a view, as I argued in detail in a chapter of my thesis.

5. "Preface to Lyrical Ballads," *Wordsworth's Literary Criticism*, ed. N. C. Smith (London, 1905), p. 25.

6. "Letter to John Wilson," *ibid.*, p. 7.

7. "Preface to Poems (1815)," *ibid.*, pp. 150-51. He also, of course, has his original views, the famous ones of "recollection in tranquillity," of "a man speaking to men," of the "spontaneous overflow" of "powerful feeling," his curious notions about diction and meter (refuted by Coleridge). All of these are subordinate to his general theory and consistent with it. This is not to deny him all inconsistency or moments

that lead away from the traditional theory. It is to insist that Wordsworth fundamentally accepts the traditional theory. He differs from older ideas in his notion of what man and nature *are* that literature is rationally and passionately to imitate.

8. Despite his rather odd theories about them.

9. In his introduction to his edition of Wordsworth entitled *Representative Poems* (New York, 1937), pp. lx-lxii.

10. Freud wrote, with religious fervor, in the peroration of *The Future of an Illusion*, "Science is no illusion." In the sense he meant it, regarding science as an adequate foundation for human values, for morality and metaphysics, science is thoroughly an illusion. If human life is an accident in a meaningless universe, value is a subjective delusion—the value of truth-seeking as much as any other—and there's an end to it.

11. A doctrine put to a use almost flatly opposite to Plato's. In Plato's version, man pre-exists knowing all, forgets everything at the instant of birth, then slowly recollects. All knowledge is recollection. In Wordsworth's poem, man proceeds from God, then, after birth, step by step moves down and away, the knowledge fading. The kinds of knowledge are also different. Plato's is intellectual, Wordsworth's, intuitive and beatific.

12. See *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. E. de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire (Oxford University, 1952-58, vols. 1-4, 2nd ed.; 1949, vol. 5, 1st ed.), IV, 463-64 (note).

13. See H. M. Margoliouth, *Wordsworth and Coleridge 1795-1834* (Oxford University, 1953), pp. 193-94.

14. One may add (has someone?) Earle's sentence in the character of "A Child" in *Microcosmography*, "The elder he grows, he is a stair lower from God."

15. I argue the genuineness of Wordsworth's experience from the quality and kind of experience described, not from a certainty that Wordsworth was directly influenced by Vaughan. On this subject, see Darbishire and de Selincourt's edition, their note (IV, 466) to vv. 36-76.

16. See his *The Descent of the Dove* (New York, 1956), 1st paper edition), esp. pp. 55-62; 93-95.

17. Cf. J. W. Beach, *The Concept of Nature in Nineteenth-Century English Poetry* (New York, 1936), pp. 151-57; H. N. Fairchild, *Religious Trends in English Poetry* (Columbia University, 1939-57), III, 200-01.

18. The motto to the 1815 edition, "The Child is father of the Man;/ And I could wish my days to be/ Bound each to each by natural piety," takes a good bit of stretching to fit the poem. Ap-



parently, Wordsworth in 1815 was concerned to stress the reconciliation more than the loss.

19. As suggested by H. W. Garrod, *Wordsworth* (Oxford University, 1923), p. 113, and Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination* (New York, 1950), pp. 133-34, 138-41, respectively.

20. Some Freudians explain that sea in any such context as a symbol for, a memory of, the water in the womb. The sea is intended quite plainly and consciously here as a symbol for supernature. And, if Wordsworth means unconsciously that the sea is the womb, why does the imagery flare so with *light*? The womb is unlit. Are we to take it that light means darkness, because it isn't, and that the sea means the water in the womb because both are wet? Lewis Carroll once told of a game in which the rules are anything you want them to be and everyone gets a prize. Only he was joking.

21. In *On the Limits of Poetry* (New York, 1948), pp. 248-62.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 256.

23. The line "Of heaven to their election in the vast breath" contains an amphibrach (x'x), a very rare metrical phenomenon in English, which can fit either "election" or "-ion in the." What happens, apparently, is a curtailed blending of two common structures. The "in" can take a normal, relative accent, "election in" (x'x'), or it can be part of a normal pyrrhic-spondaic combination "in the vast breath" (xx/). One could, I suppose, call what happens an error, since the amphibrach is apparently accidental; yet the line represents strangely and well the struggle in nature and in the mind. And the ear, not any system, must have the first and the last say in metrics.

24. *Defense*, pp. 530-31.

25. *Limits*, pp. 365-70.

## Chapter 6

1. "Logic and Lyric," *Modern Philology*, LI (1953), 33-41.

2. *Elizabethan Imagery*, pp. 3-26; pp. 281-330; pp. 354-81; and elsewhere.

3. The philosophical content of the poem—a really pessimistic determinism—would, if extended to poetic theory, abolish the beautifully controlled form. But it is not so extended, and the poem is a perfectly proper expression of sympathy for a person whose life has been ruined by forces greater than the person. Facing fate with dignified grief and courage is morally admirable, even though a total commitment to the idea of fate destroys the possibility and meaning of



moral courage. Which is to say that the instruction in the poem is flawed, and dangerous, but contains a real measure of important truth.

4. Perhaps this is why he strangely argues in favor of the short poem and against the longer forms in *The Function of Criticism* (Denver, 1957), pp. 40-47, 58-78. He contradicts himself, in the same book, by choosing as the best modern poem Paul Valéry's *Ebauche d'un Serpent*, a 310 line poem, in narrative, on the Garden of Eden.

5. Tate, *Limits*, pp. 225-37; Winters, *Defense*, pp. 575-603. Lawrence Dembo's *Hart Crane's Sanskrit Charge* (Cornell University, 1961) is a valuable, lucid, and highly intelligent study, but has not persuaded me differently on this point. It has, though, reopened the case; and perhaps the verdict I espouse needs some qualification.

6. *Defense*, pp. 59-60, 497-500.

7. Disregarding as irrelevant the question of his German sources. For those, see Wellek, *Modern Criticism*, II, 151-58.

8. *Esthétique du Mal*, section 8.

9. The discussion that follows owes something to Winters' discussion (*Defense*, pp. 439-44), but departs from Winters in several ways, most centrally in that I do not find any hedonism in the poem. Crispin's, and Stevens', chief concern is not intensity of experience, but the proper relationship between reality and poetic style, a concern that flatly contradicts hedonism.

10. Louis Martz, in "Wallace Stevens. The World as Meditation," *Literature and Belief*, ed. M. H. Abrams (Columbia University, 1958), pp. 138-65, makes much of Stevens' attempt to arrive at an adequate rhetoric and a meditation that creates its own value, but fails to observe how very tentative those attempts are and what persistent despair of real knowledge and value underlies them.

11. In *On Poetry and Poets* (New York, 1957), p. 32. Some good discussions of the "music" of the Quartets are Grover Smith, Jr., *T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays* (University of Chicago, 1956), pp. 248-50; Helen Gardner, *The Art of T. S. Eliot* (London, 1949), pp. 36-56; F. O. Matthiessen, *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot*, 2nd ed. (Oxford University, 1947), pp. 182-83.

12. *Eliot's Poetry*, p. 248.

13. Granting that some diphthongs in English are in fact longer than some disyllabic combinations and that "wire" can be linguistically one or two syllables, the fact remains that the conventions of handling syllables have been long fixed in English poetry and readers' memories. Nor is Eliot deliberately departing from convention in the lyric: it has the tightest metrical pattern of the lyrics in the Quartets.

## Chapter 7

1. See the end of Chapter 2 for the first two, the end of Chapter 3 for the third.
2. The more common case, I would suppose, happens when the son is reported "missing in action," but that case raises some complications irrelevant to my discussion.
3. C. S. Lewis's *The Abolition of Man* (New York, 1947) covers a good bit of the ground.



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